

THE HAGAR PROJECT: HEALING ANGER, GRIEF AND
RESENTMENT FOR THE EMPOWERMENT
OF ABANDONED WOMEN

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to black women, both young and old, who have experienced abandonment trauma and have not found wholeness or healing from that loss.

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This study, completed in Columbus, Ohio, hypothesizes that abandoned people experience anger, grief and resentment due to an abandonment experience. This hypothesis was researched by utilizing a case study with pre and post-test questionnaires, bible curriculum and follow-up phone interviews. The analyzed data proved that the predominant feeling by abandoned people in this study is sadness and not anger, grief or resentment. This study did not substantiate the hypothesis as the researcher hoped.

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Lastly, I want to thank all of the people who participated and were willing to share some of their most intimate and private experiences with me so that I could delve in and understand the phenomenon of abandonment and develop remedies to heal the hurt.

CHAPTER ONE
**THE ROOTS OF ABANDONMENT: SPIRITUAL FORMATION
AND MINISTRY CONTEXT**

The baby wakes to find her
head on a strange breast.
Where is *my* mother?
Author

The passion for this project emerged when I rehearsed my spiritual autobiography and context analysis at United Theological Seminary. From these sessions, I realized that I had something credible and worthwhile to say on the subject of abandonment trauma. In this chapter, I recount my experiences of abandonment by my mother, my husband and later my church. These experiences will substantiate that abandonment caused anger, grief and resentment in my life. I believe these are common feelings in all who have experienced it.

Home Alone

My childhood was not unlike many children. I had loving parents who doted over me, did their very best to give me all the things that they never had, and loved me unconditionally. I have very fond memories of my childhood.

My parents, however, were not my birth parents but my paternal grandparents. How and why I came to live with them has always been a major source of debate and argumentation with my family.

My grandparents held to one story and my mother another one. Because it was such a sensitive topic, I developed a rule for myself; I did not talk about my mother to my grandmother, and never discussed my grandmother with my mother. According to my grandmother's story, my mother left me alone in the house. When my father came home, he found me alone and promptly took me to his parent's home. I was told that my mother "*never*" came back for me. However, my mother's story says that I was indeed left home alone, but only momentarily because she had an errand to run, and I was asleep. She wasn't gone very long, but when she returned home, I was missing. When she discovered where I was and arrived at my grandmother's house to pick me up, my grandmother refused to return me to her. I was fifteen months old.

Neither story is uplifting. Neither provided me a sense of peace nor made my mother look good in my eyes. I questioned what kind of mother would not return (to my grandmother's house) for her only child? If she did, what kind of mother would leave (my grandmother's house) without her only child? I remember thinking to myself that there must be something inherently wrong with me for her to leave me with my grandparents while eventually keeping my siblings with her. Feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness took root in my spirit at a very early age. The question that I asked myself over and over was: "What's wrong with me?" I continued to ask this question many, many times as I matured into a young adult.

My grandmother and mother never restricted my siblings and I from being together. They would either stay at my house over the weekend, or I at theirs. This went on for years without incident. Over the course of time, however, noticeable lifestyle discrepancies began to surface between my siblings and I. Because I was reared (in a sense) as an only child, I was privy to a host of things that my siblings were not. I dressed better, had more material “stuff”, had the security and stability of a two parent household, went to church regularly, and had exposure to people and ideas that broadened my horizon and primed my life for success. With all of these factors in my favor, I nevertheless felt defective inside, for not living with my mother.

The abandonment that I felt by my father didn't materialize until much later in my life. The major reason for this is that he was always at my house. I saw him regularly. Moreover, because his parents were also technically “my parents”, we shared a strange bond; he was more of an irresponsible older brother than a father. He was also a heroin addict, pimp, and drug dealer who lived a very dangerous life on the street. I saw this and was able to garner a sense of pity for him, while I harbored anger towards my mother. I saw him as helpless in this situation and placed the weight of the blame on my mother.

In my teen years, this anger reached a climax. It was at this time, feeling like an adult, that I lashed out at my mother, not only angry at her for what she had done to me, but I also began to fight the battles of my siblings for things that they didn't like about her. This put my mother and I constantly at odds and our relationship became volatile. When I was fourteen, my mother decided to move to San Francisco, California. At that time, she believed that moving would afford

her benefits that staying in Ohio had not offered. She asked if I wanted to go with her, but there was no way that I was going to leave the comfort of the *only* home I knew and the *only* parents I knew and loved, in order to live with her and my siblings in California. After much discussion, my mother gave legal guardianship to my grandmother so that she could register me for school and have legal authority over my care. She and my siblings moved to California. This was the second feeling of abandonment that I experienced by my mother. Again I felt worthless and unlovable. I felt that I was not important enough for her to stay in town until me and my brothers and sisters reached adulthood. She left me again and took my family with her. She stayed there several years before returning to Ohio.

I would later confront her on how I felt about her move to California. She told me that I *chose* to stay with my grandmother instead of going with her and my family. In other words, it was my fault that I had these feelings. Her inability to take responsibility for her poor decisions and the callous way in which she responded has been a recurring wound in our relationship. My relationship with my mother, my first abandoner continued to degenerate during my late teens and early twenties. We went through long periods of having no contact. Despite this, I graduated from high school with good grades and immediately entered college where I graduated with a B.S. in Biology and a minor in Chemistry. At this time in my life, I felt that I had everything going for me. I was educated in a hard science and very employable. I had made important contacts throughout high school that gave me direction, and I was a very focused and confident young lady. I considered myself healthy, attractive and felt that the world was mine to conquer. I did not consider the abandonment or the feelings it gave me

to be a major component in my life anymore. I felt that I had grown up and gotten over them.

Alone at Home

I had one serious relationship up to this point in my life. During my second year of college, I met a man with whom I fell in love and we eventually moved in together. While my grandmother thought I was living on campus, I was actually living with him. I became pregnant by him and could not tell my grandmother, so I sought the support and advice of my mother. She took me to have an abortion, stating that I should by all means finish school and wait to have children. I was disappointed and devastated at her response. I felt so much pain knowing that I would not have that baby. After that pregnancy, I experienced an ectopic pregnancy, which turned out to be a life or death situation because I was unaware of the growing fetus until it threatened to burst my fallopian tube. I lived with my boyfriend for another year after this traumatic situation before he was unfaithful to me. I moved out of his apartment and back with my grandmother. I dated many men after this and was promiscuous. I did not honor my body nor did I ever consider a link between my feelings of abandonment and my lifestyle. I dated men who were educationally and financial inferior to me. What was most important to me about a man was that he saw my value and worth, and promised not to leave me.

I was needy in the worst way, but I was unaware of it. The thing I feared most (being abandoned) seemed to plague me throughout most of my relationships. The men I dated were all unfaithful. I allowed myself to be used by

some men because I didn't feel like I was worth much. I believe this behavior further fed into my feelings of inadequacy caused by the abandonment by my mother. With many failed relationships in my past, I desired a husband in the worst way. I was lonely and wanted to belong to someone who would not leave me. My best friend set me up on a blind date with a man for sex only. I met him and we became infatuated with each other and in less than six weeks, we were talking about marriage.

I knew very little about him and what I did know should have made a healthy woman run away. He had a history of living with women. He was the father of several children whom he did not support financially or emotionally. He had a menial job and was without a high school diploma. In his home, he had no electricity or gas. Prominently displayed on his wall were pictures of women whom he had dated. What did this college educated, Christian woman see in him, except his undying love for me. He really believed that I was the woman who would transform his mediocre life into a more promising, successful one. I bought into this line of thinking, and adopted a purpose and a project for myself in the form of a husband. My newfound purpose blinded me to his many other faults. We were married in a civil court. It was days after we were married that our marriage would suffer its first blow over something insignificant. He lied about his age. He was actually five years older than he professed to be. He lied about his age until I confronted him. I had previously seen his driver's license that stated his correct age, but he swore that the BMV had made an undetected error and I believed him.

Shortly before my marriage, I lost my grandfather. While still mourning his death, my grandmother died six months later. This was the most hurtful loss

I had experienced in my life. I felt that my security blanket had been pulled from under me. Now, I felt abandoned again; this time by my grandmother. I irrationally felt she should have given me a few more years with her before she died. She was at that time the most important person in my life and I felt insecure and alone without her. After her death, the cohesiveness of my extended family disintegrated. Aunts and cousins with whom I had grown up came out of the woodwork to say that they never liked me and never agreed with what my grandmother had done in keeping me from my mother. I was dealt with another loss, not only had I lost the most important person in my life, but I also lost my extended family identity. I still had my husband, however. Therefore, I clung to him for love and support during this time. Little did I know that the most devastating, yet life changing abandonment experience was ahead.

It is often said that the first year of marriage is the most challenging. Two lives blended into one takes some adjustment. If this is true, my marriage experience was spectacular. We had a good first year. We spent that first year spending money bringing his wardrobe up to par with mine. We purchased expensive shoes, suits, coats and anything else that he felt he needed to become a new man. He could now “feel good about himself” when we were seen together. With his wardrobe improved, I encouraged him to not only look successful, but to be successful by pursuing his GED. He went to classes and we proudly attended his graduation. I was so proud. Finally with a high school diploma, he could get a better job, which he quickly obtained. He also became a member of my home church, so we both gleefully attended church together and life was

good. I had fulfilled my purpose and project of being a “good wife” by encouraging and transforming him into a better more successful man.

However, our second year was rocky. We were both committed to sticking it out to prove the nay-sayers (and there were many) wrong, those who said that our shotgun wedding would never work. Their predictions, however, surely came to pass, because I did not know that my husband was keeping secrets from me that would end our marriage. He had other children that I knew nothing about before we married. He also enjoyed a partying lifestyle of which I was not part. I was a church-going girl and he was a party boy. He stopped partying when we first married. However, it was a habit that would be hard for him to break. Friday night was blockbuster movies night: “our” night. Saturday was “his” night. He would arrive home around 6 p.m. and begin his ritual of running himself a bath, ironing his clothes, grooming himself and heading towards the door. Some may ask: “Why didn’t you go with him?” I didn’t go with him because I knew that he didn’t want me to go and I really didn’t have a desire for that kind of life. I did not drink or smoke, so partying in the nightclubs was not a big draw for me. We did on occasion, go together and hear a live band, but women were always approaching him, which made me uncomfortable. I wanted to believe that I could give him this kind of freedom and trust and that he would respect and honor it. My biggest fear was realized when his arrival time home became later and later until he was not coming home until the early morning. Many arguments and disagreements ensued after this, giving him the ammunition to storm out of the house for hours on end. Eventually, we started to sleep separately.

We were held together by a very thin thread. We agreed to seek counseling but that did not work and the arguing continued. During the turbulence of our relationship, I discovered that I was carrying his child. This occurrence prompted him to give a valiant try to make our marriage work. What I didn't know and what he didn't say was that his girlfriend was also pregnant. Despite his attempt at reconciliation, the arguing between us worsened, which threatened my high-risk pregnancy. To give myself an outlet, I took a class at Community College to escape from the pain I felt at home. My usual routine after class was to browse the downtown stores and window shop before going home. The day before my birthday, (for some unknown reason), I felt very anxious about window-shopping. I was agitated and felt an intense urge to go home, so I skipped my usual ritual and headed for home. When I arrived, I noticed a U-Haul moving truck parked in the driveway.

My first inclination at seeing the moving truck was to assume that our upstairs neighbors were either moving out or had purchased something. As I got closer to the stairs that led to my suite, however, I recognized my in-laws (his sister and her husband) carrying items and pieces of furniture from my house onto the UHaul truck. I was shocked and stunned. I started screaming: "What is going on here???" I scrambled as fast as my legs would allow me into the house. His sister and her husband stood looking at me with blank faces, as if their mouths could form no words to describe the transgression that was taking place. He came out from a bedroom with items for the truck. He looked at me and said "I can't take it anymore. I'm leaving! You think that you are the man in this relationship. You don't have any strong men in your family so you don't know

how to submit to a real man, so I'm leaving!" I rebutted, but he continued to move items on the truck.

I tried my best to stop him from taking things I know he didn't buy or things that we had purchased together. I ran up on the truck and tried to block him with my pregnant body. But he pushed me and I fell down. I got to my feet and ran in the house and called the police, but by the time they arrived, he was long gone with most of the belongings in my house and our family car. The police said there was nothing they could do since he had left the scene. I called my godfather, and he came to the house and took me to the emergency room. After being examined and given a clean bill of health, I returned into my empty home. He left nothing but my couch, television, and bed. When I went to lie on my bed, I had to wrap up in the blanket, because he had removed the sheets from the mattress and pillowcases from the pillows. I had never felt so alone in my life, and have not since. Words cannot express the whirl of emotions, the worthlessness and abandonment that I felt at that time. I called my mother, still in shock, and she said that I shouldn't have told my husband all of our family business. It was almost as if she was saying that it was my fault. My sister later responded that she was "glad" I was fat, and because I was arrogant and stuck-up, I had gotten what I deserved.

My husband left a day before my birthday, and he never attempted to contact me. I then had to concern myself with paying rent and supporting myself. I was able to get several temporary jobs and my landlord worked with me concerning the rent. I went downtown and applied for welfare. And for the very first time in my life, I received income, food stamps and medical insurance

from the state. I did not feel ashamed, but I was so thankful that the assistance was available. My family eventually pulled together and rallied around me, but I always felt that they were secretly gloating over my plight. There was an attorney at my church who took my case pro bono and divorce proceedings took place weeks after he left. Because my husband took the car, I had to catch the bus everywhere, and this was stressful on my already sick body although I didn't feel very sick. My urine turned dark brown but I didn't know that this was not the regular course of pregnancy, since I had never carried a baby to term. In fact, my biggest pregnancy complaint was that I didn't have my husband to share in my very first expectancy. He was not there to rub my feet, or rub and kiss my growing belly. These are the fantasies I grew up with about how my childbearing experience would be. Instead, I felt alone and discarded. After he left me he never called. He never attempted to contact me or inquire about how the baby or I were. It was classic abandonment. I developed a severe case of heartburn and asked my sister what to do about it. She suggested that I ask my physician to prescribe Tylenol for my discomfort.

Arriving at the hospital and after my vitals were taken, the room began to fill with doctors. They were coming in and leaving out as other doctors were coming in. I was curious about what was going on, so I asked. I was told that I had a condition called pre-eclampsia. It is a medical condition that affects first time mothers. It elevates the blood pressure and can cause diabetes. It also starves the infant of nutrition, so I had a very small, stressed little baby inside of me. All of the physical and emotional stress I endured was now harming my unborn child. I was three months away from delivery and the doctor told me that I would not leave the hospital until I had delivered. I didn't believe that and

commented that I was not going to stay in the hospital for three months. The doctors were going to deliver my baby that evening, and they did. I had an emergency C-section and my daughter lived, weighing 1 pound, 2 ounces. I was so sick, but we both endured. On my hospital bed, I remember my pastor coming in and telling me that my ex-husband was never going to apologize. He just wasn't sorry for what he had done, so I should try my best to get over it.

My best friend contacted my husband through his family and told him that I had delivered the baby. My estranged husband at this time stormed up to the hospital and asked me what I did that our daughter was so sick and frail. I despised him for the malicious way he left me, but it was at this ridiculous display of blame and insensitivity in the hospital that I burned with unadulterated hatred for him. I vowed that I would take his life for what he had done to me. My daughter remained in the hospital for three months after she was born. God had indeed blessed her. She was strong and defied the odds. She soon came home with me only with an asthma machine. Everyone fell in love with this little baby. Her presence helped to build a temporary bridge between my family and me. My mother and sister became very helpful, providing special care needed by my daughter.

The abandonment by my husband and the stresses of caring for a premature infant proved to be quite challenging and I fell into a depression. What got me through was caring for my daughter. She was a fulltime job. She had doctor's appointments and physical therapy weekly and I had to navigate these appointments on public transportation. Her father was not available for any of the lengthy hospital visits, nor did he sleep in the hospital chairs or beds during the times when she became ill and had to stay in the hospital for weeks.

During her healthy periods, he wanted to spend time with her. But he was unwilling to help with the real work of parenting a special needs child. She required special milk, expensive prescriptions (they were never all in one store) and several trips to the hospital per week. Our arguing continued as vehemently as ever about her care and eventually the rift that existed between us caused me to file a court order of protection for both my daughter and myself. He had caused me enough stress to last a lifetime. I was not going to have anymore of it.

Time performed the miracle of slowly but surely eroding the hatred I felt for him. My daughter defied the odds and grew to be a normal, albeit petite little girl. Throughout her short life, her father has remarried yet he has not established an authentic parental role with her. To date, he has not seen her in six years, and has made no attempt to contact her. The experience with my husband was very devastating to me for several reasons: I was in a very ironically vulnerable position, now being unemployed and financially dependant on him. I also had a high-risk pregnancy, which affected my ability to earn an income, and my family structure was weak and unsupportive. I experienced anger, grief and resentment during this time. I was angry not so much that he left, but at the maliciousness of how he left. I grieved because during my pregnancy, I did not have anyone to do the “things” I expected my husband and the father of my child to do. I felt resentful for marrying him and allowing myself to become vulnerable to him. I looked back and can now clearly see all of the telltale signs that should have sent me running the other way after we met, but I ignored them. I was angry with him, but more importantly, I was angry with myself and felt like a fool for along time.

Alone in Church

I continued my regular attendance at church. But, I was angry and people were uncomfortable with the expression of my anger. When I prayed the precatory psalms for my ex-husband and his family, this was a sure signal to my church family that I had not forgiven. I was told many times by well meaning people to “give it to God” and “forgive and forget.” I was reminded that God only forgives the one who forgives. Everyone thought that the miracle of my daughters’ life should overshadow any ill will towards her father, but it simply wasn’t that easy. They would have been much more comfortable if I faked forgiveness. Because I did not, it seemed that my faith was on the line. There were other people who wanted to know what had me so downcast and after hearing the story, indirectly blamed me for the abandonment. It was very difficult for them to believe that a man would leave his pregnant wife, take most of the belongings from the house without proper provocation and then never call her back. This was a heinous and malicious act. People wondered what my role was in all of this. My ignorance of “why” he left, in the manner he left, seemed to convict me even more. Not only was I unforgiving and faithless, in the minds of some, I probably was the culprit and was unwilling to divulge my guilt.

People could clearly see, that whatever the reason for the abandonment, I was in a deep period of mourning and grieving. My appearance suffered and my self-esteem was at an all time low. I was overweight, depressed and bitter. I know that when people saw me coming, they retreated in the opposite direction. It was painful to witness my misery and pain so clearly. Other than making me

feel guilty for being angry, they offered no words or acts of sympathy. When I arrived at New Bethlehem Church in Columbus, Ohio¹, (many years later), I found it to be a strong, spirited, growing church pastored by a strong woman with a large female congregation. After joining and attending the required membership classes, I was elevated to a leadership role early in my membership. I was a new seminary graduate, and had the energy, talent and gifts to assist the senior pastor. I served as a leader in many capacities, including: member of the MIT (ministers in training), Superintendent of Christian Education and the Wednesday night adult Bible study facilitator. I was also trained by Cokesbury to facilitate their fifty-two week Discipleship curricula. I preached regularly for my pastor in her absence, coordinated youth Sunday and was a member of the board of directors.

Because of my visibility and service, I had contact with the congregation and people trusted me. Several women confided in me about their personal lives and shared their experiences of abandonment. I was uniquely sensitive to the abandonment from a husband or significant other who contributed financially to the well being of the family unit. I listened intently as they shared their pain. I began to notice changes in these women such as weight gain, distractibility, anger, un-kept appearance, and spotty attendance in church. Some of them resorted to old habits that they were trying to eliminate such as smoking, clubbing, and drinking. I recognized these symptoms as signs of depression due to their abandonment experience and their attempt to cope with the loss.

Remembering my experiences at church many years prior, I wanted to give these women something that was not a cliché, like “you’ll thank God he’s

¹ I have used a fictitious name for this church to protect the ministry of this congregation.

gone eventually” or “You must forgive him if you want God to forgive you.” These “truths” were not helpful in orchestrating one’s way through heartache, depression and low self-esteem. I wanted to reach out to these women from a biblical perspective and help them immediately while they move through the different emotions until they experienced wholeness. Because I was under female leadership with the trust and access to women who were admittedly abandoned, and a large female base that could profit from this type of ministry, New Bethlehem Church was the perfect context for this doctoral project. I began to develop contacts, deciding who would be a part of this study and contemplate how I would put the whole thing together. I approached my pastor, and asked her to be a professional associate on this venture, and she agreed, the HAGAR Project for the empowerment of abandoned women was now in its genesis.

In the process of developing this program, however, I incurred several experiences that would alter the direction of this project and my context. I had unconsciously become over extended in my duties at church. I did not complain because it is such an honor to serve in the church, but the effects of being over-extended were taking their toll on me physically and mentally. Along with being over-worked, I was experiencing financial challenges. My ministry at church did not net me any income, yet I spent more than seventy-five percent of my time in addition to a considerable amount of my income there. This was not something that concerned me while I worked two jobs. But, when I lost my second job, it was as if I still had two jobs, because my time at church increased. But, the financial stress began to rattle my stability. Eventually, I was threatened with utility disconnection and reached out to the church for help. I was told that the

church did not have the funds to assist me, but some individuals contributed what they could. I thank God for their help, but their assistance was unable to get me through the rough spots. My bills continued to pile up and my situation declined. I experienced significant anxiety, but kept up with my ministry duties.

I finally hit bottom in late December 2005. I felt deeply sad and melancholy. No matter what I did, I could not shake it off. I had been depressed before, after my pregnancy, so I recognized depression, but this feeling was different and more intense than my previous experience. I cried constantly. Life did not feel good or worth living. I felt paranoid and had problems concentrating. I immediately contacted my pastor to let her know that something was happening to me and that I felt my mental stability slowly slipping away. I was terrified at this feeling of “helpless-ness” bordering on insanity, and I needed some time away from my duties to collect my thoughts and find out what was happening to me. In my communication to her, I also provided a plan of transition for my temporary departure by putting some well-equipped people into place. I had not planned to step down immediately, but to send out an alert to say that something was wrong and I needed to start a transition in leadership immediately.

The response that I received from her was rather shocking especially due to my mental state. Her reply was that ministry is difficult and will take an emotional toll on you. She encouraged me to remain strong and steadfast against burnout. Her thoughts were that a transition would take time, and that I should try to stick it out. I agreed that ministry can take its toll, but I also knew that I was more than just burned out. I was experiencing a physio-biological

emergency and needed to pull out momentarily to get my bearings. Thinking that I had not made that fact clear, I wrote her another email, in hope that I could convey my plight even more eloquently. Her second reply was similar to the first, with examples from her own life of times when she wanted to walk away, but couldn't and didn't, and how she had grown because of staying the course.

After this response, I grew angry. I was more concerned about regaining control of my life at the present time rather than trying to see the benefits of pushing myself to reap benefits later. I spoke with a fellow MIT at the church about her response. This friend thought that somehow I had not conveyed my situation clearly. She suggested that I write a resignation letter and stop playing word games if I really needed to release my ministerial duties for a time. On her suggestion, with a letter that she helped to script, I emailed another letter to my pastor that gave my immediate resignation of ministry duties. The letter was accepted but not appreciated or understood by my pastor. Our communication stopped after that email as I entered into a cycle of depression that I was not sure I would mentally recover from.

During my depressive state, I was paranoid, suicidal and extremely anguished and unable to function normally. I wept daily and felt as if my life, my ministry and gifts had been stripped from me. I was emotionally and spiritually empty and was bed-ridden for days at a time. My sleeping patterns changed, and I became an insomniac, sometimes staying up all night and throughout the day. It was a very dark and lonely period of my life. Early on I felt as if I wanted to end my life. Each day was getting darker. When I thought that today was the day I would take my life, the only image I could see was the face of my daughter, and the expression she would have if she found me dead. As much turmoil as I was

in, I understood that I could not place that burden on my daughter. She deserved more than that. I could not abandon her.

While developing this abandonment project, I became severely depressed and once again felt abandoned this time, by my church. During my entire hiatus from the church, only two women from church came to my home. They made two trips to ensure that I had food in my refrigerator and to make sure that my daughter was well. They also prayed and laid hands on me while in my wilderness experience. The person I thought should have come to pray for me was my pastor, but she didn't come and wouldn't dawn my doorsteps for another five months. Needless to say, I was very angry, bitter and distressed that the woman with whom I had served so diligently and sacrificially for had seemingly kicked me to the curb and never looked back.

My breakdown happened in December 2005 and I was scheduled to attend my D.Min plenary in January 2006. I attended but I was ill. I had not sought medical attention yet, so I experienced disorientation and confusion while in Dayton. When I am weak, God is strong and truly was my strength while there. In the following months, I fell into an even deeper depression, and did not think that I was mentally capable of completing the Doctor of Ministry degree. I was afraid that I would never be able to overcome the confusion and paranoia I felt. After seeking medical care, however, things changed drastically. I began to feel like myself again, able to think clearly and formulate conclusions. My hope for completion of the degree was renewed.

In May 2006, five months after leaving the church for medical reasons, I received an email from my pastor. In it, she apologized and said that although she had experienced depression and worked her way through it, she simply did

not understand the severity of my situation and asked if she could come over to visit. On that visit, she sat with me and presented me with a gift she had picked up from one of her overseas trips. It was good to see her and I did forgive her, but I did not trust her and knew that I would not be returning to that church. This presented an obstacle for me. I was no longer attending the church where this project started.

Summary

In order to complete this project, I had to revise the original ministry focus. Instead of focusing primarily on women who have abandonment experiences, I broadened the focus to include men as well. In everyday conversation with people, I met both men and women who have experienced abandonment and have asked them to be a part on this project. The addition of men and their experiences also benefited this project by adding a different dimension and point of view. The need to feel a sense of wholeness transcends race, gender and class. My project is to provide empowerment strategies to abandoned people through biblical exploration to examine and heal the feelings and attitudes produced by abandonment.

In this chapter, I have rehearsed my earliest experiences with abandonment from both my mother and later husband that give me an authoritative voice on this subject. From my earliest memories of wondering why I didn't live with my mother, to missing both her and my siblings when she moved to another state, to later experiencing the abandonment from my husband that would literally change my life, I have endeavored to rid myself of the

recrimination and shame that is the residue of abandonment and embrace healing and wholeness. Extracted from my spiritual autobiography are compelling examples from my life that begged the questions about healing and care for abandoned women within my context of the Black Church.

It was in church that I began to notice familiar traits of abandonment in some of the women to whom I ministered and served in church with, as well as hear the pain in the voices of people whom I met and spoke to on a daily basis. From these experiences, the passion to provide empowerment for healing the negative stigmas of abandonment, referred to as the HAGAR Project: Healing Anger, Grief and Resentment in women who have experienced abandonment trauma was born. In the following chapter, I will outline my, biblical, historical and theological mandate for this study as well as relate what is known about abandonment in literature and how it has been diagnosed and treated historically.

CHAPTER TWO

ECHOES OF ABANDONMENT: EXPLORING THE BACKGROUND OF ABANDONMENT

My heart weeps.
An indescribable pain I feel.
What is this pain? What is its name?
How does it sound?

Author

This chapter provides the critical foundations necessary to support the HAGAR Project. It will explore Womanist Theology as it relates to abandonment, the biblical story of Hagar, the Egyptian slave of Abraham and Sarah, which models one of the many ways abandonment is found in scripture, and the significant literature that historically informs abandonment trauma and provides suggested steps towards recovery.

The HAGAR Project and Womanist Theology

I understand Theology to be critical questioning of the character, personality, power and compassion of God. Many examples have informed my inquiry: God in the lives of biblical persons, God in the lives of pioneers of the Christian faith, God in the history of African Americans and other peoples of color, and God in the life and ministry of the church and its outreach to the local community and

Diaspora. All of these examples have helped to form my understanding of God for this project. However, where God is most powerfully seen is in the everyday experiences of my personal life, my struggles, hurts and pains. My experiences are most influential for crafting my understanding of God that influences my construction of the HAGAR Project.

Prior to this abandonment project, I had not questioned my personal theology. The idea of scrutinizing God's actions in any situation including those in my life appeared fruitless. I was content in knowing that an "all-powerful God" would never leave nor forsake me. I was further comforted in the fact that I served a "good God" who would never give me more than I could bear. I have examined my personal theology and beliefs about God embarking on my conscious journey of "faith seeking understanding."¹ While on this journeyed, I realized that other women and black female theologians in particular had already begun the inquiry into who God is and how has he participated in our lives. The theological school that informs this inquiry is found within the study of Black Liberation Theology with a specific emphasis on the lives and experiences of black women, called Womanist Theology.

At the heart and genesis of Womanist Theology is the quest to understand God in every aspect of the lives and experiences of black women throughout the ages. Women such as Cheryl Townsend Gilkes and Delores S. Williams were among the first female theologians to recognize the need to name and claim a theological voice that characterizes the experiences of black women apart from

¹ The motto of St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) — "Faith seeking understanding" (fides quaerens intellectum)

the liberation theology of black men and the feminist theology of white women.²

Williams' book, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, defines the features of the womanist theology. She writes:

Womanist theology attempts to help black women see, affirm and have confidence in the importance of their experience and faith for determining the character of the Christian religion in the African-American community. Womanist theology challenges all oppressive forces impeding black women's struggle for survival and for the development of a positive, productive quality of life conducive to women's and the family's freedom and well-being. Womanist theology opposes all oppression based on race, sex, class, sexual preferences, physical disability and caste....Womanist theology...also branches off in its own direction, introducing new issues and constructing new analytical categories.³

Alice Walker coined the term "womanish" in her book, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. There she pours out in prose the heart and soul of what it means to be a black woman. She writes:

The term womanist comes from womanish. (Opp. of girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e. like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression, "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. Serious.⁴

²Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Womanist Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 4.

³Ibid., 60.

⁴ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi-xiii.

In her own words, Walker says that a “womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.”⁵ By this, she means that Womanist theology is similar to, but not the same as feminist theology. There are significant differences that separate the experiences of black women from those of white women.

Delores Williams’ account of Womanist theology strongly influences the theological mandate for this work. Dr. Williams names and defines a theological voice unique to the black woman’s perspective and historical way of using the Bible *in* and *for* their everyday lives by using Hagar, the Egyptian maid/slave of Sarah mentioned in Genesis, chapters 16 and 21, as an appropriate model and paradigm for this theological voice. What she identified with Hagar, in her experiences with Sarah and Abraham, was a black woman within a context where she had limited power at the mercy of those who had absolute power in that society. This is a realistic reflection of the history and existence of black women in America. She also recognized that in Hagar’s wilderness experience, she was provided with the ability to survive in a hostile environment, rather than be liberated from it, which also reflects the American experience of black women. In Womanist theology, the story of Hagar is paradigmatic of Black Women’s experiences of abandonment. I will develop that relevance in the following section.

Hagar in Womanist Perspective

This section will explore the historical and social background of Genesis 21:8-21 as it relates to the abandonment of Hagar, the concubine of Abraham, the

⁵ Ibid., xii.

mother of Ishmael, and the resources and empowerment provided for her by God. It will also explore Genesis 16 as background narrative to the Genesis twenty-one saga.

The traditional authorship of the book of Genesis is attributed to Moses, (ca. 1525-1405 B.C.E.)⁶ while another popular theory derived by Julius Wellhausen, a biblical scholar, posits the Documentary theory, which attributes the authorship of Genesis to four major strands or traditions edited together by a redactor/s.⁷ This theory accounts for the many perceived discrepancies in Genesis. Thus, Genesis may be an anthology of theological histories from many different writers. The two traditions or stands of thought responsible for Genesis, chapters 16 and 21 accordingly are “J” and “E” respectively. The “J” or Yahwist and the “E” Elohist sources are believed to be the oldest traditions in Genesis. “The world of the Yahwist and the Elohist is the world of the monarchy of Israel (1000-800BCE), when Israel sought to describe its place and purpose on earth and in the ancient Near East.”⁸

Most of the material written in the Pentateuch was written by men for men.⁹ Therefore, the history of the Ancient Near Eastern culture was one of patriarchy, which literally means “rule of the father.” In this culture, his rule was absolute and uncontested. He had complete control of political, economic, military, religious and social affairs of his clan. In short, he had the power of life

⁶ Walter Harrelson, ed., et al. *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 1.

⁷ Ibid., 1.

⁸ Ibid., 2.

⁹ T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, *Dictionary of The Old Testament Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 898.

or death over them.¹⁰ Likewise, the purpose of marriage in the Old Testament was to secure sons to perpetuate the male line. Having a male heir not only perpetuated the family line, but it also provided social status by giving the father prestige in the community. It was economically advantageous to have a son because he could be left property and manage the family affairs, whereas women could not secure or own property. A son would also be responsible for taking care of his father in his old age and arranging his burial upon death.

Just as men were esteemed in this society, barren women were stigmatized and experienced shame for not bearing *any* children for their husbands, and male children in particular. Male heirs were so important and crucial to this societal structure that the law of the time counteracted the unfortunate likelihood of a man taking a barren wife by allowing a barren woman to supply a surrogate, usually a slave girl, to her husband in an effort to secure male children. This was a very common practice in Mesopotamian culture and practiced by the Israelites. The code of Hammurabi, a Mesopotamian law code includes regulations on this practice and states, "if a wife gives her slave to her husband for a child, the slave could not rank with the wife."¹¹ It also says that if the slave bore a child who caused problems for the wife, the slave could be disciplined.¹²

¹⁰ Howard Vos, *New Illustrated Bible Manners and Customs* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 31.

¹¹ *The Law Of Hammurabi* [page on-line] (accessed 15 July 2005); available from www.wsu.edu/~dee/MESO.CODE.HTM; Internet.

¹² Ibid.

Occasionally throughout the Pentateuch passages seem to address women's needs. The passages related to Sarah's barrenness is an example. It is in the light of this concern for Sarah and ultimately Abraham that we enter into the saga of Hagar. In Genesis chapter fifteen, God promised to make Abram the father of many nations. In the shadow of this promise, it is reiterated that Abram is childless. He has no son to be his heir not only because he and Sarah are both beyond childbearing years but Sarah is also barren. To resolve this, Abraham plans to make the son of one of his servants Eliezer, his heir. This practice was also customary when the head of the household was childless, or had no male son.

Despite Abraham's lack of children, there is a dramatic covenant ceremony where God, who initiates the covenant, cuts a covenant (an ANE covenant ritual, where the covenanting parties walk between the split bodies of a slaughtered animal symbolizing that the same fate should become either party if the covenant is broken) while Abram slept thereby swearing upon Himself that he will take full responsibility for the fulfillment of the covenant of a male heir for Abraham. From this elaborate and intentional ceremony, it is certain that Abram will not remain childless for long.

Sarah is distressed by her inability to bear children. Barrenness in her society was a negative stigma and would have caused her great shame and embarrassment. She seeks to eliminate this shame and provide a male heir to her husband. She is able, through the custom of the day, to provide her servant or handmaiden to bear a child on her behalf and be given the legal rights to this child, and with this, we are introduced to Hagar. In verse 16:1, Genesis identifies two facts about Sarai before any action in this pericope takes place. The author

identifies that she is barren and that she has an Egyptian slave. This slave was subordinate to her and was at her mercy. Sarah could do with her slave what she wanted. Slaves were generally not mistreated, but that was left up entirely to the slave owner.

In verses two and three, Sarai approaches Abram. She has been contemplating her fate and tells Abram that God has prevented her from bearing children. Believing that God has indeed caused her womb to close, what are her feelings about God? Does she trust Him? From the passage, it looks like she does. In her great anticipation of becoming a mother she believed that God would supply her need through her self-sufficiency and resources. She hastily devised a plan to give Abram her Egyptian handmaiden, Hagar, providing the son God promised and also serving to elevate her status and lessen her humiliation in the community. Hagar has no say or voice in this decision. She cannot give her consent, nor can she withdraw it.

Abraham was the lord of the home and had absolute power in it. He could have decided that taking Hagar did not satisfy the covenant promises by God, but he did not object to the idea of taking Sarai's maid as his wife. He listened to Sarai and did as she said. He had the authority and power to object, but he did not. He raped Hagar and she became pregnant with his child. This was social oppression because Hagar was not free to exercise her will. She had no power to decide her fate. In verse four, only the voices of Abram and Sarah are heard. The author tries to give us some insight into their thinking. The voice that is silent, that has no words and no choice, is Hagar. In that social context, it was Abrams prerogative to take as many wives as he could afford, have sex and father as many children as possible. That was considered the norm. By today's standards

however, to have sex with a woman without her consent is rape. It *was* rape back then, but their patriarchal customs masked it by upholding the concubine laws. Today, we cannot help but see the injustices that women silently experience in scripture. This kind of silent injustice can be seen in other passages involving women being used against their will throughout scripture.

Hagar, now pregnant, was considered to be a second or subordinate wife to Abraham and Sarah. Instead of her unborn child providing Sarah social esteem, however, it caused Hagar to look upon her with disdain. Sarah experienced rebuke, haughtiness and contempt by Hagar once she conceived. Scholars say that pregnancy had been so highly regarded in that society, that once Hagar became pregnant, she did not look upon Sarai with respect and reverence.¹³ In other words, she disrespected Sarah. This can be seen as a direct parallel to the disrespect shown to Hagar's voicelessness in Abraham and Sarah's violation of her freedom and her body. Hagar had achieved something that Sarah herself could not do. The text does not hint at what her thoughts or feelings were after she missed her period, but it is clear that she did not ask or seek this position. This decision was made for her. Delores Williams suggests in her book, "Sisters in the Wilderness" that the reason why Hagar rebelled against Sarah was because of a breach of trust. She was a virgin, which would have given her status in her Egyptian heritage. Sarah usurped the one thing that gave her social esteem and honor and her rebellion was her reaction to Sarah's betrayal of her virtue.¹⁴

¹³ Harrelson, *The New Interpreters Study Bible*, 33.

¹⁴ Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness* (Orbis Books: New York, 1993), 18.

The text is silent about the nature of the disrespect. Maybe Hagar got smart with her, or flaunted her growing belly. What is made clear in the text is that Sarah's attempt at self-adulation and redemption at the expense of another woman backfired. Her misguided decision caused her shame so she did what Adam did in the Garden of Eden; she blamed someone else for her predicament. Adam blamed Eve and she blamed Abraham. She devised the plan to use Hagar's womb, now she appeals to Abraham's authority. This juxtaposes the authority she exerted in the beginning of the story. Sarah now believes that Abraham should have known better—that he should have foreseen the folly of her decision. Because he did not assert his authority when he should have, it is now his fault that she experiences more shame than before. She cries, “May the Lord judge between you and me!”¹⁵

The distribution of power, like a tennis ball, bounced back and forth from Sarah to Abram in this story. Sarah, deferring power, tells Abraham that he has to deal with her disrespectful pregnant servant. Abram returned power by telling her to do unto Hagar what *she* saw fit. Sarah exerts authority over Hagar again. In that culture, it was expected for Sarah to hold Hagar accountable for her insolence. She would need to punish Hagar to again maintain social status and esteem. The scriptures don't say how Hagar was punished. Slaves had a certain dignity in that society and the Torah provides statutes governing the treatment of slaves. “The treatment accorded to slaves depended directly on the personality of their masters. It could be a relationship of trust and affection, but discipline might be harsh, even fatal, though to kill a slave outright carried a

¹⁵ Gen. 16:5 NIV

penalty (Ex. 21:20) doubtless death (Lv. 24:17,22)”¹⁶. Suffice it to say, Sarah given full authority, oppressed Hagar to the point that she and her unborn child fled into the wilderness towards Egypt, towards home. Home is where we retreat when the circumstances of life mistreat us. Hagar was headed towards home to the place where she had a voice. She was running towards home to find freedom and liberation from her oppression. This punishment is seen by Biblical scholars as a *reversal of oppression*, paralleled to the harsh treatment experienced by Sarah’s ancestors, the Hebrew slaves and Hagar’s ancestors, the Egyptians under the leadership of the Pharaoh.¹⁷ The Israelites sought liberation from Pharaoh as Hagar sought liberation from Sarah. Even though Sarah’s actions were considered appropriate under the social customs of the day, they put her at fault once again for the lack of a male heir for her household.

God sends Hagar back to Abraham’s household. She is not liberated from the oppression, but sent back to it. The etymology of Hagar’s name is uncertain, but it is believed to be Arabic “flight” or “to flee”¹⁸. If it is Egyptian, it might mean “fortress” conveying stamina¹⁹. She fled the oppression of her mistress to liberate herself as best she could from her pain. She encountered the angel of the Lord near a spring and he showed his concern for her by asking her a series of

¹⁶ I. Howard Marshall, A.R. Millard, J.I. Packer and D.J. Wiseman, *The New Bible Dictionary* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 1111.

¹⁷ Harrelson, *The New Interpreters Study Bible*, 34.

¹⁸ David Noel Freedman, et al, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Volume 3, H-J (New York: Doubleday), 18.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

questions. He asks, “Where have you come from, and where are you going?”²⁰

The Lord already knew the answers to these questions, but gives Hagar an opportunity to tell her story of oppression, rape and mistreatment. It is often therapeutic in the midst of anguish and despair to be able to tell *your story*, to have a voice. It is noted that the appearance of the Lord is remarkable in several ways: “God appears and speaks directly to a woman; that woman is not the matriarch of the Israelites, but the future matriarch of a nation that will have conflict with the Israelites; and that God makes a promise to this mother that mirrors those made to Sara and her husband, to have a son and to have numerous descendants.”²¹

The Angel of the Lord tells her to return to her mistress and submit to her. She is told to return to her pain, to her oppression and yield her control. Why does the Lord send her back? Is this deity concerned with her plight or is he only concerned with the issues that concern Sarah? The text doesn’t give us insight into these probing questions; perhaps she is sent back to gain strength and fortitude for her future or maybe she was sent back so that this experience would allow her to find her true voice, and finish the process of refinement. Her humility after returning would be greater than if she’d never left. Perhaps the deity was building up in her the characteristics and qualities that she would need because her future was going to be much greater than her past or her present. By her return, she marks out a high road of conduct, calling her to render respect due Sarai by virtue of her position as a servant.

²⁰ Gen. 16:7

²¹Harrelson, *The Interpreters Study Bible*, 34.

She is told that the name of her son shall be Ishmael, meaning, “God hears,”²² indicating that God had indeed recognized and understood Hagar’s plight and He was responding. Hagar was indeed special to God as shown by the supernatural encounter with her, an unlikely recipient of his presence. “She names the deity who speaks to her *El Roi*, The God who sees me, and she names the well “the well of the living one who sees me”. Hagar is the only woman in scripture who assigns a name to a deity. She is the only woman, like Abraham, to receive a promise of numerous progeny.”²³ Delores Williams points out a very poignant fact about Hagar’s naming of God. El is the highest Canaanite God; therefore, names compounded with El are not generally associated with the deity of the patriarchs but with specific cultic sites. Hagar’s God may be a localized form of a single great divinity not associated with the patriarchs. Hagar did not utilize Sarah’s god. Her God, *El Roi*, a seeing god could refer to a god of her culture, the Egyptian seeing god Ra.²⁴ Because she does not name her god according to the Patriarchal traditions, she reclaims her power. This significant act mirrors her hostility and aggression towards Sarah and her god. By naming her God, Hagar was destroying the name of Sarah’s god. In the Egyptian culture, destroying a name of someone or something was considered an act of revenge.²⁵ She goes back as she is instructed by the Lord and delivers her son, and names him Ishmael as the Lord commanded. Ishmael’s life would reflect the survival

²² Ibid., 34.

²³ Ibid., 34.

²⁴ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 24.

²⁵ Ibid., 24.

skills necessary for a quality of life in the wilderness. Ishmael is not a slave, but born free and would grow to be a warrior.

Hagar is not seen in scripture again until Genesis twenty-one, where Ishmael is a young boy. In this Elohist account, a continuation of the Yahwist account of Ishmael in chapter sixteen, Isaac should be aged more than fifteen years, but he is actually portrayed as not much older than Isaac. The difference in traditions accounts for this obvious discrepancy.²⁶ In the narrative, God fulfilled his promises to Abraham and Sarah. He opened Sarah's womb and she bore the child of promise and named him Isaac, which means, "laughter."²⁷ All of the shame and guilt that Sarah carried because of her barrenness was lifted from her. She could laugh with the joy of having accomplished the unthinkable by giving her husband a son in her old age.

It appeared that as Isaac grew in age and stature, his older brother Ishmael mocked him, according to some Biblical translators. Others say that Ishmael was "laughing" with Isaac, employing a play on his name.²⁸ Whether Ishmael laughed, or mocked Sarah's baby boy, scholars differ, but what is sure is that, Sarah demanded Abraham to abandon and forsake both Ishmael and his mother from the comfort and safety of their home. Sarah now foresees a threat; that the slave's son could share in her son's inheritance. In this context, Sarah is not only more powerful than Hagar, but her desires are paramount. To be forsaken implies to forget or discontinue. It is the abandonment of an individual who has

²⁶ Henry Wansbough, *The Jerusalem Bible* (New York: Doubleday), 41.

²⁷ Harrelson, *The New Interpreters Study Bible*, 40.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

no one else to care for his or her distress.²⁹ In this ANE society, women were legally, financially and physically helpless without male guardianship. Women, who were the most vulnerable, were often the most abandoned in the Bible. It is this fact that made Hagar's abandonment so devastating.

Abraham loved his first-born son and showed distress at Sarah's demand but God confirmed that he must consent and cast both his eldest son and Hagar away, though the decision is a difficult one for him. Hagar was disrespectful to Sarah upon her pregnancy, now Sarah is disrespectful to her. This is Hagar's second time leaving this home. The first time was after the mistreatment of Sarah and she left. This time it is again from the mistreatment of Sarah, and she is being put out, never to return again. The promises that were made to Ishmael and Hagar in Genesis sixteen are reiterated here. God assures Abraham that his eldest son will also be a great nation. It's interesting that Abraham doesn't once question God in this decision to abandon Hagar and Ishmael. He doesn't rail at him. Abraham's character flaw of acting in ways that protect himself at the expense of others (giving Sarah as a wife to the Egyptian king) emerges here. I am not surprised by his actions, but disappointed.

Abraham rises early in the morning preparing to abandon his concubine and first-born son into the desert with only a days' ration of bread and water. The Hebrew word for desert is *midbar*, and designates land that has been burned by the summer heat, wasted rocky and sandy land that receives little rainfall.³⁰

²⁹ Michael Agnes, ed. *Webster's New World Dictionary and Thesaurus* (Cleveland, Ohio: Wiley Publishing, Inc.), 252.

³⁰ Leland Ryken, James Wilhoit and William Longman III, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 948-9.

The wilderness generally has a negative association when used throughout the Bible. It is associated with danger, death, rebellion, punishment and temptation, and as the dwelling place of evil spirits³¹. It was into this wasteland, this abyss, that Hagar was abandoned to, and wandered in, powerless. But, God promised that she would survive and that her son would be a great nation. God blessed where man erred by giving Ishmael a blessing

In Hagar's wilderness experience, she suffered a moment of weakness, which caused a lapse in her faith. God had promised her that he would make her son a great nation. Yet when the water was gone and the bread eaten, she abandoned her son under the bushes. The pain of seeing him die was too great for her. Had she forgotten God's promises or did she not believe them? In her deepest despair, she cried out to God and he heard her, as promised to her by God in naming her son Ishmael, (God hears). She again meets God in the midst of her despair. When her resources were depleted and she had left her son to die, God showed up. Hagar cried out, but it is the voice of Ishmael, (God hears) that God responded to. A voice from heaven called out, and questioned Hagar. He wanted to know what troubled Hagar. He then reiterated the promises that were bestowed to her son, directed her to retrieve her son and revealed to her a well that already existed in her midst. Water, symbolizing life,³² revitalizes both her and her son. When it looked like abandonment was going to disempower and debilitate both Hagar and Ishmael, God had a different plan. Hagar, a slave, is then given the hope of survival in the wilderness and the prospect of longevity

³¹ Ibid., 949.

³² Ibid., 929.

where her life of slavery and abandonment would afford her minimal survival until her death.

This story shows that in the midst of abandonment, powerlessness and despair, God is El Roi; He is the God who sees, who values and who is concerned about those that are outside of the family of promise, the marginalized. He is powerful in the midst of powerlessness. God is also faithful to hear the cries of the forgotten, the expendable and those that are cast aside and powerless. In Hagar's powerlessness, God reveals his true character to her. In her weakness, Hagar can trust that God is aware of her situation and cares. God came to her and showed her resources that were already in her midst to survive the separation from her husband. God gave Hagar a promise that she and her son would not die, but prosper. He made provision for Ishmael and Hagar's survival because Ishmael would grow to be "a wild ass among men,"³³ very suitable to survive in the wilderness. For women enduring an abandonment experience, fearing economic and emotional loss, God has shown that He will prevail and provide by allowing resources already available to be utilized for survival.

From Hagar's narrative, women can see a theme of restoration. Hagar was shown that she had the resources to survive without the help of Sarah and Abraham. Abandoned women can also recognize from this story that the resources needed to sustain themselves already exist. Abandonment is not an end, but a realization that one can draw on internal resources and move towards flourishing. I believe that Hagar, during her abandonment, experienced feelings of anger, grief and resentment. She experienced anger at Sarah for offering her

³³ Gen. 16:12 Amplified

womb as a surrogate for a child that would never carry her name and be credited to another woman. She was angry for her rape by Abraham while she was yet a virgin, who would never honor her as his primary wife. She experienced anger at the abusive hands of Sarah so much so that she left her oppressors home and fled into the wilderness without provision or protection. She ran away to the danger of the unknown, feeling that the uncertainty of the wilderness was better than the reality of her oppression.

She was grief stricken upon being abandoned. She abandoned her son to die at the hands of the harsh wilderness environment. She wept with grief, as she could see no means of survival for their lives. It was with deep grief that she hid her son in the clef of a rock to die. She also experienced resentment. She rebelled against Sarah and it was for her rebellion that Sarah treated her harshly. I believe that her greatest moment of resentment and rebellion was not against Sarah as it was against Sarah's god. In naming the deity that met her in the wilderness El Roi, she sought to eradicate the name of the God that sent her back to the hands of her oppressors³⁴, the God that made it right for her body, her womb to be utilized for the glory of another woman and another nation without her consent or well being. In the next section, I will outline the theological warrant for the Hagar project.

Delores S. Williams and Womanist Theology

The theological mandate that will support this project is not surprisingly found in Womanist theology. Williams uses Hagar's story as told in the Bible as a

³⁴ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 25.

paradigm for the experiences of Black people and Black women in particular. She posits that Hagar's life and her experience in abandonment is a true parallel to the experiences of abandonment by African American women. Like Hagar, who experienced anger, grief and resentment towards those who inflicted pain upon her, African American women have similar feelings. Williams' theory about the role of Yahweh in the Hagar story reflects a womanist reading of the text, which looks at the text from the experience of the black woman involved, Hagar. It is clear that one of the results of Sarai's abuse upon Hagar caused her to flee. Out in the wilderness, Hagar meets God, and he tells her to return back to her mistress. Williams asks: "What kind of loving God sends one back to their oppressor?" Hagar returns to Sarai and Abram. She delivers Abrams son, Ishmael. During this time, Sarai conceives, just as God has promised, and delivers Abrahams son of promise, Isaac.

Sarah sees the slave woman's son playing with her son. She tells Abraham to send both his first-born son and his mother, away, and Abraham obliges once he receives confirmation from God. Again Hagar finds herself in the wilderness. Hagar realized that Sarah's god was not a god that had her best interest at heart. Hagar realized that Sarah's god was not going to provide a liberation experience for her. Instead, it was El Roi who provided a means of provision by showing her what resources were available and empowering her to use her own resourcefulness. "Liberation in the Hagar stories is not given by God; it finds its source in human initiative," says Williams.³⁵ Thus, Hagar embarks on a life that will be based on survival by her own initiatives. Seeing that Hagar has to

³⁵Ibid., 5.

survive by her own initiatives, black women must strive to heal by their own initiative.³⁶

As we delve into the theological mandate for this project of healing and restoration of black women who have experienced abandonment, the question that begs for an answer is: “Can a paradigm of abandonment empower women to oppose abandonment?” In other words, can a model of abandonment be salvific for women who have been abandoned? Will it empower them to overcome the obstacles of abandonment in their lives or will it reinforce oppression? If not, what theological mandate found in our record of sacred scripture will give an empowering paradigm for women like Hagar, who abandoned, finds themselves in the wilderness? This is important because many black women find comfort, solace and protection against life’s trials in the life, ministry and sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross in the New Testament.

Williams asserts that the cross of Jesus the Christ is not salvific for the empowerment of Black women in an abandonment experience. I will deal with the efficacy of Jesus on the cross for abandoned women and then deal with the paradigm of Jesus that does provide wholeness and healing. The death of Jesus on the cross and the concept of his death for our salvation is the core belief at the foundation of salvation in Christianity. This belief is what makes one a Christian. Very similar to Hagar, Jesus was used as a surrogate to bring new life. Similar to Hagar, he was abandoned by the God of the patriarchs. In the crucifixion of Christ, God not only offered him as a sacrifice, but also abandoned him at his time of greatest despair. Indeed, the model of the cross is the most powerful and

³⁶Ibid., 6.

convicting evidence for God's suffering on our behalf and of his love for us. It *has* and *is* one of the most powerful salvific paradigms for the black church.

Unfortunately, however, as powerful as this model of selfless love, compassion and sacrifice is for the Black Church, it is not a paradigm or model by which suffering people can find liberation and empowerment. Because of Jesus' own blatant abandonment experience, his crucifixion can't be used as a salvific experience for abandoned women. In Jesus' case, his own father relegates him to the cross and essentially abandons him. "God satisfied Gods own violated honor by sending God's son to earth in human form ultimately to die on the cross," says Williams.³⁷ Black women can't rely on God for their liberation after seeing how he acted toward his own son, Jesus, and his refusal to liberate Hagar.

Williams points out that the very suffering of Christ, whom some hold dear, causes those who are suffering to accept prolonged experiences of suffering with no hope or expectation of liberation. She also calls into question God's moral character by questioning the acts of a patriarchal God who was so insensitive to Hagars' predicament, that he sends her back to an abusive environment. What the cross communicates is that if Christ, the only begotten Son of God can suffer on our behalf, then, we can suffer and expect to suffer as well. Suffering then becomes apart of our experience of God. Suffering becomes salvific. Therefore, with this strong and powerful connotation of suffering modeling divinity, we are numbed to suffering, and don't recognize it as the signal needed to seek wholeness and healing.

³⁷ Ibid., 163

I have interpreted Hagar's abandonment in the wilderness as a patriarchal society creating a patriarchal God, who is more concerned with the bigger picture, which in this case is the perpetuation of Abraham's family, the purported chosen people of God by which he has promised that all others would be blessed then he is with the dignity and wellbeing of Hagar, a slave. In achieving this goal, the lives of those not included in the immediate plan seem expendable and their unfortunate circumstances a casualty of the greater vision or plan. The acts and decisions of God in this light can certainly be interpreted as insensitive, patriarchal, racist and misogynistic.

Although liberation and empowerment are not found at the abandonment of Jesus on the cross, it can be found in the life and healing ministries of Jesus Christ, Williams argues. Jesus quotes Isaiah 61:1 in the synagogue when describing his ministry mission in Luke 4:18-19 when he says:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.³⁸

Jesus healed the sick, made blind eyes see, stopped bleeding that no one else could and exercised evil spirits, thus providing the liberation and empowerment paradigm needed for women suffering with the trauma of abandonment. In the New Testament scriptures, and the gospels in particular, Jesus' life's work is one of resistance to cultural identities that allowed the continuation of patriarchal prejudices and oppression to a new way of identifying humanity as one people

³⁸ Luke 4:18-19 NIV

in the sight of God. He was transforming a culture that was sustained by male/female, Jew/Gentile or slave/free inequities to one of “neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female”³⁹, a thought that would revolutionize social order and class. Jesus also provided a means of survival to the oppressed and marginalized by healing them, which in turn brought wholeness that instantaneously changed their status in society. Jesus modeled survival most powerfully for the black woman as he confronted and conquered temptation and evil in his time of abandonment in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11) where he, in a weakened physical state, was tempted by evil to succumb to the hubris of society by resisting “the temptation to value the material over the spiritual, by resisting death by not attempting suicide and resisting greed by monopolistic ownership.”⁴⁰ His conquering of the devil showed black women that when faced with abandonment in the wilderness, where one is weak, hungry, cast aside with no where to go, they can find strength to persevere and overcome the temptation to die, and find the strength needed to overcome and live productive lives. We, as Christians cannot deny the cross experience, but neither can we condone its violence for liberation and empowerment of the oppressed. For Williams it is in the life of Jesus Christ and not his death that we find and experience empowerment and liberation.

³⁹ Galatians 3:23 NIV

⁴⁰ Williams, *Sister's in The Wildreness*, 66.

Abandonment in Historical/Literary Sources

The historical mandate and literary review have been combined because abandonment is as much a biophysical phenomenon as it is a social devastation and plight. With that being so, however little has been written about abandonment critically. Therefore, this section will look at how abandonment has historically been defined, the causes and consequences of abandonment and how it has been treated clinically.

The act of abandonment cannot be traced back to a specific place and time. It is ultimately one of the byproducts of free will in human relationships. The trauma and grief associated with it have undoubtedly affected every person alive in differing degrees because it can be found in every arena and stage of life. It affects infancy and childhood before we learn that our parents are coming back after they have momentarily disappeared from sight. It pervades adolescence when rejection from popular clique leaves one feeling inadequate and it is felt in adulthood when a person experiences the excruciating pain of their first broken heart.

For the purposes of this study, I will adopt a definition by Cynthia Parker, editor of Bella Online Single Parents. She defines abandonment as “the unplanned and unexpected separation by your mate where reconciliation is not attempted nor an option, accompanied by a lack of communication, visitation and support.”⁴¹ Abandonment is a pervasive wound, one that penetrates the

⁴¹ Cynthia Parker, *Raising A Child Alone- Abandonment* [journal on-line] (Bella Online, accessed 20 October 2006); available from www.bellaonline.com/articles/art29661.asp; Internet.

depths of one's soul. It creates an emotional crisis with deeply bruised feelings. Emotions run very high during this time and mood swings are common. At its very core, "human fear is at the core of abandonment"⁴². Fear is not generally a positive experience, as it can wound and debilitate. It causes one to experience feelings of betrayal, rejection and aloneness, invisibility and nothingness especially when a primary relationship where emotional, physical and financial dependence ends abruptly. It unfortunately affects the entire array of personal and interpersonal relationships; those shared with children, significant others, co-workers and especially the relationship we have with ourselves.

Abandonment grief or abandonment trauma is unique. It differentiates itself from other forms of grief because the abandonee's (the one who is left) self esteem is damaged. Along with being angry with the abandoner (the one who leaves), you are also angry with yourself. The rage felt at being left is "turned inward and as a result, depletes self-esteem and is characterized by self-attack, self-recrimination and the internalization of rejection."⁴³ It causes great personal discomfort, pain and dysfunction, which is often transferred to others. As much as abandonment affects one emotionally, spiritually and mentally, it also has a biological component. Hormones such as oxytocin, corticosteroids, DHEA and casomorphin are involved in the areas of attachment and attraction. They increase the intensity of anguish, despair and feelings of hopelessness in abandonment and make the experience more difficult to recover. The extreme feelings of grief in tangent with the hormonal component can cause one to take

⁴² Susan Anderson, *The Journey from Abandonment to Healing* (New York: Berkley Books), 9.

⁴³ Ibid., 11.

extreme measures, such as homicide, suicide or assault.⁴⁴ Abandonment can be defined many ways, but it is best defined by the universal feelings it generates of being unimportant, invisible, worthless, and unlovable. These feelings cause mental, physical and spiritual devastation not only to the individual, but also to their entire social context.

The list of reasons why a person abandons another is exhaustive. A person who abandons usually has experienced a prior abandonment experience involving physical and emotional abandonment issues, which causes *in them* an intense fear of abandonment and low self-esteem, so they abandon before being abandoned themselves. It follows the same line of thinking that an abused person without intervention will become an abuser. In the early stages of personality development, missing elements such as family stability and nurturing causes weak character development. Conditions of a weak character allow one to make immature decisions and choices concerning others along with an inability to deal with stressful situations. Other personality traits that trigger a person to abandon or flee from another include: infidelity, lack of commitment, financial problems, failed expectations and unmet needs, addictions and substance abuse, physical, sexual or emotional abuse and lastly a lack of conflict resolution skills. Characteristics that identify one who is prone to abandon include narcissism, selfishness and sociopathic behavior.⁴⁵

People caught in the throes of unhealed abandonment exhibit an array of negative patterns in their life and relationships because they seek to dissociate

⁴⁴ Ibid., 186.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 86.

from their pain and find ways to soothe, comfort and validate the emptiness they feel inside. These patterns not only reduce their experiences of fulfillment but also prohibit fulfillment in the lives of those they interact with. Abandonee's self medicate by developing addictions which include overeating, indulging in alcohol and drugs to anesthetize themselves from the pain they feel, participating in indiscriminant and promiscuous sex, ignoring the dangers of HIV / AIDS and unwanted pregnancies. They also indulge in compulsive shopping and gambling. Studies have identified that most drug abusers (alcohol and heroin) have histories of abandonment.⁴⁶

Unhealed abandonment grief can also be an underlying issue for those who struggle with mental and physical ailments. Many people have negative tendencies that plague their life (anger, rage, distrust), which causes neediness and extreme jealousy. They have no idea why they have these feelings and don't know how to heal them. They can also be plagued with physical aches and pains, headaches, lower backaches, change in weight (gain or loss), depression, shoulder pain, low energy levels, sleep pattern change.⁴⁷ These individuals usually don't link their illness with their abandonment blues.

Susan Anderson, a clinical counselor, has done major work on the topic of abandonment and says on her blog, Abandonment Recovery. Com, that abandoned people tend to develop "traumatic bonds" with people.⁴⁸ Traumatic

⁴⁶ Brenda Wade, "Fear of Abandonment: A Psychologist helps to heal hidden wounds that hold us back," *Essence*, April 2005.

⁴⁷ Erica Bryant, *The Harms Of Fatherlessness To Black Women* [page on-line] (accessed 20 October 2006); available from www.afrigeneas.com/forum/indices/cgi?noframes;read=12695; Internet.

⁴⁸ *What Is Abandonment? FAQ* [journal on-line] (accessed 25 August 2006); available from www.abandonment.net/faq/frame.html; Internet.

bonds are characterized by attaching yourself to someone who has caused you pain. The more pain you feel, the more attachment you feel to them. Traumatic bonding must be treated as an addiction and requires complete abstinence to break it.

The abandonment experience of the African American female is unique, according to Toby Thompkins, in an article entitled, *The Real Lives of Strong Black Women*.⁴⁹ He says that black women experiencing abandonment are plagued with the pain of abandonment in addition to the need to remain strong in a society that has a superwoman expectation of them. A black woman can't afford to break down and jeopardize the stability of her family. The black community harbors a myth that black women are the pillars of strength in the family. This myth grew out of slavery, where she subjugated her needs for the needs of others. In slavery, she birthed and nurtured the new members of the labor pool while serving as nanny to the white children of her owners. She was also the one who was left on the plantation to keep the family together when her husband was sold or killed. Most black women unfortunately are raised with the expectation that the men they meet and birth children for may abandon them. They are raised with the thought that their relationship may or may not be permanent. So, in being strong, the Black woman begins to assess relationships in binary terms: either you are for me, or against me. Toby says this attitude is

⁴⁹ Toby Thompkins, *The Real Lives Of Strong Black Women: Transcending Myths, Reclaiming Joy* [page on-line] (New Jersey: Agate Publishing, 2004, accessed 28 July 2006); available from www.tobyspeaks.com/mediakit.pdf; Internet.

“psychic” pressure where they unconsciously live in the shadow and fear of abandonment.⁵⁰

The truth is the black woman had to be strong to defy the dehumanizing efforts that sought to control them. This myth is still perpetuated in the black community today and does not allow for her to show any weakness or fragility. Therefore, when she is hurt or in pain, she cannot seek refuge or self care because she is supposed to be the paragon of strength. She is supposed to nurture and care for others, while her needs go unmet. Most black women are clinically depressed without ever knowing it because they don't stop to care for and seek healing and help for themselves. Depression affects about 7 million American women each year and is responsible for 30,000 suicides. Symptoms of depression include weight gain or loss, too much sleep or insomnia, moodiness, pessimism about the future, loss of interest in sex, over-reaction trivial events, trouble concentrating, thoughts of death and dying, social isolation, low self-esteem, and feelings of helplessness.⁵¹ Depression in Black women can manifest itself as fatigue, backache, hypertension, overeating, sleeping disruptions, abdominal pain, and shoulder, neck and lower back pain.

Matthew Johnson in a published article entitled, *Men without Women, African American Crisis*, says that the Black family is in trouble.⁵² Black men inflict wounds upon themselves by betraying those who love them and bear their

⁵⁰ Ibid.,

⁵¹ *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Rape, Trauma Syndrome and Battering* [page on-line] (United States Department of Justice, 2004, accessed 06 October 2006); available from www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ovc/publications/infores/student/postram.htm; Internet.

⁵² Matthew Johnson, *Men Without Women: African-American Crisis* [page on-line] (Religion Online, 1986, accessed 20 July 2006); available from www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1986; Internet.

children. He says that the Black male was emasculated during slavery through the legal and social destruction of the roles of father and husband. Negative behavioral patterns emerged during slavery and the Jim Crow era that still serve to plague Black men and their families today. Men have children and then following misdirected self-indulgences, abandon them. These irresponsible actions are sadly reproduced in their own sons. The economic deprivation, loneliness, social isolation, stress, emotional and physical exhaustion of Black women are exacerbated by the abandonment and betrayal of Black men.

By far the most damage done by abandonment is done to the children. Similar to the syndrome of divorce, children tend to blame themselves and take responsibility for the loss of the parent that left. Not only do they blame themselves, but they also feel unloved and unlovable. They blame the parent that was left for the loss of the other parent. This can cause disciplinary problems for the custodial parent who's trying to readjust to the loss for themselves. This pressure is unfair and potentially hurtful to the child if there is no intervention done to help them understand that they were not responsible for the irresponsibility of the parent who left. In abandonment, where there is no communication or contact with the children, irreparable damage can be done to the child's self-esteem, and another generation of abandoners and those prone to abandon are created. These children develop anger issues, wondering why "they" don't have both parents. They are reminded of their loss on birthdays, Christmas, and Father's day and experience envy when they see intact families or when their friends discuss their relationships with their fathers.⁵³

⁵³ Cynthia Parker, *Raising A Child Alone- Abandonment* [journal on-line] (Bella Online, accessed 20 October 2006); available from www.bellaonline.com/articles/art29661.asp; Internet.

The American Academy of Pediatrics has observed unique problems associated with single parent families.⁵⁴ Mothers experience a higher level of stress because they are solely responsible for the decision making of the family without the emotional and economic support another adult would make. It is shown that children in a single parent home exhibit several age appropriate symptoms. Preschoolers may regress in developmental skills such as toilet training, problems eating and sleeping and acute separation and fear of abandonment. School aged children present symptoms of anger, sadness or depression, blame themselves for the parents for separation or deny the separation altogether. They show declining school performance and behave aggressive and anti-social. Adolescents become suicidal, run away from home and can become involved in substance abuse. Family counseling and an attentive parent can overcome some of these symptoms. Children who are abandoned also suffer economically and socially. They lack the financial and emotional resources necessary to avoid the pitfalls of poverty. They can get caught up in the cycle of self-medicating their hurt by quick money, promiscuity, drugs and alcohol, and the lack of ambition. These are the costs of a break up that are never counted when one partner decides to abandon the family unit.

All children are the true casualties of family separations but it is especially devastating to the female children left behind. The phenomena of black girls being raised without their fathers has been studied and researched extensively because there is a direct correlation between the self-esteem of Black women and

⁵⁴ *American Academy of Pediatrics* [journal on-line] (American Academy of Pediatrics, accessed 23 October 2006); available from www.aappolicy.aappublications.org/cgi/reprint/pediatrics;110/5/1019.pdf; Internet.

their exposure to the love and nurturing of their fathers. In a book written by Jonetta Rose Barras entitled, *The Impact of Fatherlessness on Black Women*, she poignantly details her experience of feeling “unwanted”, and wondered what it would feel like to be “daddy’s girl”. She began to “attack” herself as she looked for a reason why her father was absent, focusing on the color of her skin, (she was too black), her physical attributes (her hair, her nose, her body). Girls try to reason and find a reason for the loss of their fathers. She points out that “fatherless women” experience several factors in common. She begins with the “un” factor: feelings of unworthiness and of being unlovable. Then, there is the “triple fears factor”, where the girl grows to fear rejection, abandonment and commitment. These three fears are termed the “abandonment syndrome” by clinicians who deal with counseling issues with abandonment. Like the “un” factor, they also experience the “over” factor, which is overcompensating in loving relationships by doing too much, being an over-achiever, who is trying to prove to her father and herself that she has not been damaged by his absence and that it is his loss that he left her.

The fatherless black women’s sexuality is also affected. The relationship between a girl and her father will impact the nature of all of her relationship with men. Wade Horn, a clinical psychologist is quoted by Barras as saying, “the father is generally the first man the daughter wants to love.”⁵⁵ If the love is returned, the girl grows up feeling a sense of worth and therefore demands

⁵⁵ Jonetta Rose Barras, *Impact Of Fatherlessness on Black Women* [journal on-line] (2002, accessed 10 July 2006); available from www.xnet.kp.org/permanentejournal/spring02/daddysgirl.html; Internet.

worth from the men she invites into her life. The other men must live up to the standard set by her father. If the love is not reciprocated, a woman grows up without any perspective on how a man should treat a woman. They have not had the opportunity to learn from their primary male relationship, which is their father. Therefore, fatherless women go through life trying to find and replace the male love that they never received from their fathers. They really don't know what they are looking for because they have no reference point. The search for this love can lead women to look for love in all the wrong places. They participate in sexual relationships and have babies trying to fill the void of the love they never had. Any man who expresses any kind of love and caring for her, rather that love is dysfunctional or not, will attract her and keep her bound.

Psychologist A.L. Reynolds in his book entitled, "Do Black Women Hate Black Men", state's that black women with no relationship with their fathers grow up to be angry with men, because of the scarring due to abandonment.⁵⁶ Black women unconsciously seek men whom they think will teach them about love. Women whose fathers abandon them will generally seek men who will reciprocate that abandonment in their lives. Until this destructive psychological cycle is broken, Black women are compelled to involve themselves with men who detract away from their wholeness, worthiness and sense of being. The effect of abandonment on Black women is pervasive and cyclical. Only black men and Black women can put a stop to the destructive cycle that is prevalent in

⁵⁶ A.L. Reynolds, *Do Black Women Hate Black Men*, [page on-line] (accessed 10 October 2006): available from www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb3384/is_199411/ai_n8129541; Internet

today's black families and serve as a major reason for the number of single female headed households.

Abandonment has symptoms of anxiety and depression and is treated by mental health professionals like the grief associated with death. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. The most essential element to grieving is acknowledging that there is a grieving process, and to complete the entire process. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross M.D in her book, "On Death and Dying", developed five stages of the grieving process that health professionals use to deal with grief. The five stages are: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.⁵⁷

In the stage of denial, there is no acceptance or acknowledgement of the loss. In a death situation, people still expect the deceased person to call or come by. In the anger stage, there is a feeling of wanting to fight or get revenge for the loss. It is also characterized by blaming the deceased for leaving. In the bargaining stage, there is an attempt to strike a bargain or make a deal with God to reverse or change the loss. Begging, wishing and praying for the person to come back characterize this stage. In the depression stage, there is an overwhelming feeling of hopelessness, frustration, bitterness, self pity and mourning for the loss of hopes, dreams and plans for the future. Lack of control, feeling numb and even suicide rule this stage. The final stage of the five-stage process of grief is acceptance. In this stage, there is acceptance of the loss and a realization that the person is gone and that good that can come out of the pain. In this stage, one finds comfort and healing.

⁵⁷ *The Five Stages of Grief* [article on-line] (Counseling For Loss, accessed 24 August 2006); available from www.counselingforloss.com/article8.htm; Internet.

The clergy also counsels many on death and abandonment issues. Because clergy have a lot of experience with people but limited clinical experience, they generally try to address the hurt and pain with spiritual truths from the Bible and what they know about the faithfulness of God and his ability to meet every need and heal every wound. Clergy must be aware of the accepted stages of grief however, to be able to assess where the person is. The most important contribution that clergy provides is the powerful word of God to address the pain, a non-judgmental ear, and a shoulder to cry on. Clergy persons should also be able to assess when counseling from this perspective is not enough and to refer the individual to a professional clinician. Wayne E. Oates in his book, *Grief, Transition and Loss*, believes that the primary task of clergy is to facilitate the telling of the griever's personal story of grief. If a person can put words to the feelings that overwhelm them, they are better equipped to turn their tears and unutterable sorrow into healing.⁵⁸

One of the most popular strategies developed specifically for abandonment grief and trauma is the Akeru strategy developed by Susan Anderson, a clinical counselor who has extensively studied abandonment and its affects. Susan Anderson has identified five stages of abandonment grief that are significantly different from the standard grief stages identified above. Her five stages of abandonment include: shattering of hopes and dreams, withdrawal from love, internalizing the rejection, rage towards your ex, and lifting back into life.⁵⁹

Shattering of hopes and dreams is the realization that you have no longer have a present and future with your significant other, knowing the abandoner

⁵⁸ Wayne E. Oates, *Grief, Transition and Loss* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 19-20.

⁵⁹ Anderson, *Journey From Abandonment*, 14.

can establish a future with someone else and has rejected you. This stage is characterized by shock, pain, panic, and loss of life's worth and meaning. There are feelings of suicide, helplessness and dependency. Similar to drug withdrawal, the withdrawal from love stage involves an intense craving and agitation for your lost love. There is an attempt at possible reconciliation. There are feelings of sleeplessness, weight loss and/or gain, anxiety, emotional and physical fatigue. In internalizing the rejection stage, the anger and rage focused toward the abandoner is internalized and directed towards the self, and emotional wounds resulting in damage to self-esteem can occur. There is a pre-occupation with regrets over what you should and shouldn't have done in your relationship. In the rage towards your ex stage, your self-esteem is restored and the anger and rage towards your ex becomes self-empowering. Anger is expressed towards your ex but people who have difficulty expressing anger can turn this anger inwards developing depression. Fantasies of retaliation and revenge towards your ex are common in this stage. In the final stage, lifting back into life, rage energy has helped to lift you back into life. You experience a lifting from depression and sadness to peace and freedom. You begin to feel stronger and wiser from the painful experiences. You let go of the anger and move on with life. These stages are circular, not liner, meaning that one can reach one and regress back to another, or be in more than one at a time.

In each of the five stages of abandonment grief of the Akeru healing strategy⁶⁰ there are accompanying exercises to perform during the stages that allow the abandonee to fully work through the stage. For the shattering stage, the

⁶⁰ Anderson, *The Journey from Abandonment*, 23-24.

healing component is staying in the moment, which encourages the abandonee to feel the hurt and pain without anesthetics, and access the energy associated with the pain you're feeling and use it to heal. For the withdrawal stage, the healing component is called separation therapy that addresses your innermost needs by having personal dialogue to deal with and separate the part of yourself that is wounded from the abandonment from your healthy self. A psychoanalyst, Dr. Richard Robertiello, developed this technique. Internalizing the rejection's healing component is called building a dream house, a visualization technique where one begins to focus on the goals and dreams for their life and uses visualization.⁶¹ Rage's healing component is identifying the outer child, which serves to help you understand your responses to anger and change it. Identifying your outer child allows access to unconscious places in ones self, where defense mechanisms grow and challenge personal progress. This is also a visualization exercise. The final abandonment stage of lifting has the healing component of increasing the capacity for love, which is learning to reach out and develop new relationships. These stages are unconventional, but many have found them healing.

Summary

To summarize, abandonment is pervasive, and its biblical victims range from Hagar to Jesus. The Bible teaches, however, that God will never leave or forsake us. The cases of abandonment discussed in this chapter shows that liberation is not always the logical end of abandonment and prompts one to ask

⁶¹ Ibid.,102.

questions about the nature and character of God. Can God be trusted in every instance? This chapter shows that he can be trusted through his healing ministry evidenced in the New Testament. Although abandonment is so prevalent, there is still not a conclusive body of scientific work done on it. People, such as Susan Anderson, have started to document that abandonment grief differs from the death of a loved one and has to be treated differently. In the next chapter, I will look at the methodology employed to produce this project.

CHAPTER THREE

ABANDONMENT DEFINED AND EXPOSED: RESEARCH DESIGN

The purpose of the HAGAR Project is to investigate the affects of abandonment trauma in the lives of woman who have been abandoned by a significant other. The hypothesis, based on the literature explored in Chapter Two, is that abandonment causes low self-esteem and residual feelings of anger, grief and resentment towards the abandoner. This factor provides the title for this project: "The Hagar Project: Healing Anger, Grief and Resentment for the empowerment of abandoned women." I expect to find instances of anger, grief, resentment, and low self-esteem prevalent in the participants of this project.

To address their wounds and provide emotional healing and wholeness to each participant, a Bible curriculum was formulated that consisted of three components. Each component was designed to address one specific issue as identified in the above hypothesis. The nature and context of this inquiry lends itself to a qualitative research design. "Qualitative data consists of words and observations, not numbers."¹ My approach was based on case studies. Case studies are an "in-depth examination of a particular case—a program, group of

¹ Ellen Taylor-Powell and Marcus Renner, *Analyzing Qualitative Data* [page on-line] (accessed 16 August 2006); available from www.S14212519.onlinehome.us/uw/pdfs/G3658_12PDF; Internet.

participants, single individual, site or location.² This short-term method was useful for this project in several ways.

The time constraints placed on the completion of this project did not allow for a more extensive research method, such as a focus group, which could last from six months to a year. This method met the satisfaction of achieving the research objectives within limited time constraints. The method was able to measure the individual differences in the participants' responses to abandonment. By its design, it was able to accommodate the variances expected in the responses, as all the participants were in different places in dealing with their issues. Furthermore, the case studies allowed for intervention at a more personal and relational level.³ There were four participants involved in this case study.⁴ A detailed description of each participant and why that participant was chosen will follow.

Mrs. A is a twenty-nine year old white woman who has been married for eleven years to the same person. They are the parents of a nine-year-old daughter. Her family is new to the neighborhood and could economically be considered middle to lower class. In an introductory conversation with her, she volunteered information about her recent separation and reconciliation with her husband that qualified her for this case study. Her husband left her for her sister. He told her that he no longer loved her. She had a story to tell that is important to this study, because while she has experienced abandonment, she is with her

² John Creswell, *Research Design Qualitative, Quantative and Mixed Methods Approaches* (London: Sage Publications, 2003), 15.

³ Jackie Baston, "Data Planning and Analysis" handout, United Theological Seminary, August 2006.

⁴ All participants names are anonymous and referred to by a letter designation.

abandoner trying to reconcile. This was intriguing and adds a unique perspective to the study, so she was invited to participate. She has a Christian background although she is not currently attending church regularly.

Mr. B is a fifty-seven year old single white man who has been in Christian ministry as a pastor for thirty-five years and could be considered middle class. He and his ex-wife have three adult children, two girls and an adopted son. As a ministry acquaintance, he shared in a personal phone conversation that his wife of twenty years left him for another man thirteen years ago while on a trip to Europe. Her betrayal caused an irreparable tear in his family and everyone suffered from the break-up. He experienced obvious pain and grief over the matter and that distress was reflected in his voice. He was asked to participate in the study to provide a male perspective and awareness on the effects of abandonment.

Mrs. C is a thirty-year-old African American woman who is the single parent of three children, two boys and a girl and could be considered middle to lower class. Each child has a different father. Her ex-husband is the father of her youngest son. She is a regular church member, and asked advice about a situation with her ex-husband after church one day. After hearing her story, it was apparent that she had been abandoned and was having a difficult time adjusting to the changes that accompanied abandonment. She always appears angry, was experiencing problems with her children's schooling and started to gain a significant amount of weight. She was chosen to participate because she was in need of an intervention that would neutralize her toxic emotions, halt her apparent downward spiral and provide healing. It was the observation of this woman in church for several months that gave rise to this project.

The last participant in this case study is Mrs. D. She is a single African American parent with a daughter, age thirteen. She has been divorced for thirteen years and could be considered middle to lower class. She is also a regular church member and has openly shared with others her troubles as a single parent. Giving her testimony in church one evening, she disclosed that her husband had abandoned her and their infant daughter. As she reflected on the occasion, she felt that it was actually a blessing, and even though the experience was devastating, it was also life changing. She was chosen to participate because she has no contact with her abandoner and insists that she has forgiven him completely. These factors add a unique perspective to the abandonment experience and her input would also give another dimension to the project.

The measurement chosen to investigate the phenomena of abandonment for this project was a questionnaire. It was chosen for various reasons. It was an inexpensive tool to administer to a wide range of people for data collection. It also allowed for the anonymity of the respondents, ensuring their honest participation with it. The questionnaire was extremely useful in corroborating the findings of other researchers utilizing other measurements and tools.⁵ The questionnaire was designed to measure anger, grief and resentment as stated above in the hypothesis. It was also designed to measure whether they have forgiven their abandoner and if they have suffered in other relationships because of their experiences. This questionnaire was constructed only to meet the requirements of this project. Thirty questionnaires were initially sent out before the four participants were chosen for this case study.

⁵ *When To Use A Questionnaire* [page on-line] (Online Research Solutions, accessed 16 August 2006); available from www.studentresearcher.com/whentouse.asp; Internet.

The questionnaire served as both a pre and a post-test for this project. The questions on the questionnaire are as follows:

1. What does abandonment mean to you?
2. What was your relationship to the person that abandoned you?
3. Are you still in a relationship with the person who abandoned you?
4. How long has it been since you experienced abandonment by the significant person/s in your life?
5. What did this person “mean” to you?
6. In your feelings of abandonment, did you experience anger, grief or resentment? If so, how were they experienced by you?
7. How have you learned to “cope” or “deal” with your sense of abandonment now?
8. How has this experience affected particular areas of your life? For example, work, home, family, friends, church?
9. How has abandonment affected your interpersonal relationships? For example, romantically, in terms of trust?
10. What descriptive (adjectives) describe your abandonment experience?
11. Have “you” abandoned anyone since your abandonment experience?
12. Have you been able to forgive the person/persons who have abandoned you?
13. Now that you have completed this questionnaire, what are your feelings about your abandonment experience?

The questions were designed in this measurement to access information from the participant in order to test the hypothesis of this project. On the questionnaire: question 1 was designed to measure the respondent's definition of abandonment. Questions 2, 3 and 12 were designed to identify the relationship status between the abandoner and abandonee. Questions 4, 5, 7, 10 and 13 were designed to measure the actual experience of abandonment for the abandonee. Question 6 measures the affects of abandonment in the life of the abandonee and questions 8, 9 and 11 measure the quality of their interpersonal relationships.

The pre-test questionnaire was emailed to the participants following contact from myself as the principal researcher. This allowed the respondents the freedom to complete it in the comforts of their home. It was returned back within ten days. Once all of the data was received back from the pre-test, a packet containing the HAGAR Bible curriculum was mailed to four participants in the case study. Each respondent was given two weeks to complete the curriculum, which consisted of a five-day curriculum that addressed each of the three components of anger, grief and resentment along with some journaling exercises.

Two weeks after the HAGAR curricula was mailed, the each participant was called by phone and interviewed for an hour-long phone to review their responses to the HAGAR curriculum. Participants were also asked about the efficacy and helpfulness of the HAGAR curriculum in addressing the components of anger, grief and resentment. The phone interviews were taped with the consent of the participant. The interviewees were asked a series of questions:

1. What did you think about the forgiveness section of the Bible study?

2. After reviewing the stages of grief, what stage do you think you're in?
3. What did you think about the section on self esteem?
4. My last question is how do you think God empowered you while you experienced abandonment?

The questions varied slightly with each participant, according to the answers and comments made concerning their experience with the curriculum. Because the interview was conversational, the principal researcher addressed any concerns that were brought up in the conversation whether or not they pertained to the HAGAR study. After the phone interview was completed, each participant was emailed a post-test questionnaire. Each participant had five days to complete it. The responses were used to test the above stated hypothesis and to determine the efficacy of the HAGAR intervention. In the next chapter, the results of the post-test, the HAGAR curriculum, phone interviews and post-tests will be analyzed to determine the reliability of the hypothesis asserted at the beginning of this chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

ABANDONMENT EXPLORED: IMPLEMENTING THE HAGAR CURRICULUM

This chapter details the step-by-step implementation of the HAGAR Project along with data analysis based on the responses of the pre-test questionnaire and the HAGAR curriculum. In this chapter, I will review the pre-test data, review the HAGAR curriculum phone conferences and lastly, review the post-test data.

The instrumentation of the HAGAR project followed several steps. After the respondents were selected (Their profiles are discussed in the previous chapter), they were emailed a copy of the pretest questionnaire. Included in the mailing were directions on completing the questionnaire along with the ten-day time constraints they were given to complete it. As an added incentive to stay within that guideline, a five-dollar Walmart gift card was included with each mailed questionnaire. Below is the sample of the questionnaire.

Pre and Post Test Questionnaire

1. What does abandonment mean to you?
2. What was your relationship to the person that abandoned you?
3. Are you still in a relationship with the person who abandoned you?
4. How long has it been since you experienced abandonment by the significant person/s in your life?
5. What did this person "mean" to you?

6. In your feelings of abandonment, did you experience anger, grief or resentment? If so, how were they experienced by you?
7. How have you learned to “cope” or “deal” with your sense of abandonment now?
8. How has this experiences affected particular areas of you life? For example, work, home, family friends, church?
9. How has abandonment affected your interpersonal relationships? For example, romantically, in terms of trust?
10. What descriptive (adjectives) describe your abandonment experience?
11. Have “you” abandoned anyone since your abandonment experience?
12. Have you been able to forgive the person/ persons who have abandoned you?
13. Now that you have completed this questionnaire, what are your feelings about your abandonment experience?

Five days after emailing the pre-test questionnaire, phone calls were made to ensure the recipients received it and to encourage them to complete it within the stated time frame. The completed questionnaires began to trickle in after many reminder phone calls and its content were analyzed according to five questions.

Pre-test Analysis

First Question: What was the respondent's definition of abandonment?

The analysis of the pre-test suggests that the participants¹ all have similar definitions of abandonment. They all used words like: being left, betrayed, deserted, lack of commitment and devastated by someone they loved and trusted.

Mrs. A: “Being left behind, or in the dark.”

Mr. B: “Abandonment is the experience of being betrayed and deserted by someone who was committed to care for

¹ Names changed to insure anonymity of the participants.

you or partner with you. It is breaking of a solemn promise, either actually spoken (as in marriage) or implied (as in a parent's implicit but sacred promise to care for his or her child).

Ms. C: "I define abandonment as when a person has an obligation to another and they do not live up to that commitment and leave the other individual instead.

Ms. D: "Leaving someone who loves you without mutual agreement and the person leaving never comes back-leaving you devastated, feeling as if you never existed.

Second Question: What is the relationship status between you and your abandoner?

In identifying the relationship status between the respondent and abandoner, one respondent currently lives with her abandoner, while the other three are divorced. Three of the respondents remain in relationship with their abandoner because of the children they share. One respondent, however, states that although she has a child with the abandoner, her ex-husband has no contact with their child. So, most of the respondents maintain some sort of continued relationship with their abandoner.

Mrs. A: "Well we are back together now." "I have forgiven my husband and[we] are trying to work this out."

Mr.B: "We are parents together, therefore we will always share a relationship, however strained.

Ms. C: "Yes because we have a child together."

Ms. D: "We do have a child together, but he has not ever been very active in her life and it has been over 5 years since we last spoke."

Third Question: What was your experience of abandonment?

All of the respondents expressed feelings of devastation, shock, despair and disbelief when they recount their individual experiences of abandonment.

Mrs. A: "Empty, ill, lonely, don't care attitude. The hell with everyone. No one cares how I feel so I don't care how they feel. But empty is the best way I can describe it. Broken would also be a good word to describe my experience." "My heart was scattered. I even contemplated suicide."

Mr. B: "Heartbreaking, soul-shattering, spirit-rending . . . for a start. But also life-changing, deepening, strengthening, transforming."

Ms. C: "Hurt, pain, neglect, shame, incompatible, inadequate, failure, disappointment, broke, and confused."

Ms. D: "Devastating, worthless, bleeding, painful, death, nothingness, insignificant, hurtful."

These feelings could be expressed in the terms of anger, grief and resentment, postulated in the hypothesis of this project. Most felt that although they had a support system to help them through the negative array of feelings, they were too disconnected to benefit from it.

Mrs. A: "My other sister, brother and mom, also his mom and dad became concerned for me. I had quit taking my meds and they knew how much I loved [Jason].² But I rarely talked with any of them. Because I did not want their opinion on how I should deal with the situation or how I should feel about [Jason] and my sister [Susan]. So I ignored them."

Mr. B: "Family and friends tried to reach out to me, but the experience of abandonment happened shortly after we moved to a new city: I knew no one there and was at some distance from family and friends."

² Names changed to insure anonymity of the participants.

Ms. C: “and I try to do things all on my own, I rarely even call on my family and truly believe most of the time that it is just me and God and that is the way that it is.”

Fourth Question: What are the effects of abandonment in your life?

Analysis of the responses indicates that the affects of abandonment on the respondents at the time of the abandonment experience left them feeling withdrawn hurt, suicidal, anti-social and sad. These feelings seem to be expressions of their anger, grief and resentment for each respondent.

Mrs. A: “Yes, I felt all of them. Where my heart once was, was a cavity there was no heart. My heart was scattered. I even contemplated suicide. I did not want to live. I was hurt by my husband.”

Mr. B: “I felt the full range of emotions . . . anger, shame, hatred, self-pity, vengeful, fearful, depressed. I felt the full range of emotions . . . anger, shame, hatred, self-pity, vengeful, fearful, depressed.”

Ms. C: “I was mad as hell.”

Ms. D: “I was angry, devastated. Because of the way he chose to leave (not tell me and try to move out before I got home) I was confused, stunned, shocked, numb. After a while, I started to feel worthless, but I was so angry at him that I wanted him dead.”

Fifth Question: What is the quality of your interpersonal relationships?

The quality of their interpersonal relationships has been for all participants negatively affected by their abandonment experience. All admit to being distrustful and guarded toward people of the opposite sex.

Mrs. A: “When I was separated from my husband I just didn’t care for anyone anymore. No one seemed to appreciate anything I did anyways so why try. Even my friends and family saw a difference. I was slowly turning into a person I didn’t even like.”

Mr. B: "The most obvious early effect was an inability to develop healthy relationships with women. Until I went through a process of forgiveness (including forgiving myself for my failures in the marriage), my early relationships were skewed by my anger and cynicism and inability to trust. I feared commitment . . . and when a relationship reached a point of requiring it, I did something to sabotage it."

Ms. C: "This experience has definitely affected me. I am very leery of people and their motives for being nice or trying to get close to me, especially females. Men I typically do not want help from them and I try to do things all on my own."

Ms. D: "For a brief time, I hated men, and thought of becoming a lesbian, but couldn't. As far as relationships go, I have always tucked in the back of my mind the hurt and devastation divorce has, it has made me be fearful in relationships. I certainly have trust issues."

After assessing the questionnaires, a phone call reminded each participant that the HAGAR curriculum was being mailed and of the two-week time frame for its completion. The HAGAR curriculum consists of several components. Days one and two consisted of a reading assignment (article) with accompanying questions to answer. Day three consisted of an article on grief and a journaling assignment and days four and five consisted of a reading assignment (article) along with accompanying questions. The curriculum had to be completed in five days.

Responses to the HAGAR Curriculum

The first component of the HAGAR curriculum focuses on forgiveness. It was designed for completion on days one and two. Following is the question

component of the HAGAR curriculum. The reading component (article) can be found in the appendix.

The HAGAR Curriculum: Forgiving From the Heart

How do we know we have truly forgiven?

In his article, “forgiveness—The Power to Change the Past,” Lewis B. Smedes talks about forgiveness as a redemptive response to having been wronged and wounded. Jesus commanded us to forgive our brother from our heart (Matthew 18:35). Yet because we have memory, sometimes the hurt and pain resurfaces, and we find that once we are struggling with the very issue we thought we had forgiven.

How do we know when we have truly forgiven? Why must we forgive others? What are the steps to forgiveness? Does forgiveness always mean reconciliation? This study will discuss these issues.

READ ACCOMPANYING ARTICLE AND COMPLETE QUESTIONS BELOW³

Identify the Current Issue

When we are wronged, our human nature demands revenge. It is easy to dwell on ways to get even so that the person who injured us pays for the hurt he has caused us. We often replay hurtful conversations in our minds, wishing we had come up with clever, stinging comments to rebuff our offender. The Bible,

³ Accompanying article located in appendix.

however, tells us that we are to forgive others because we are forgiven. The same grace and forgiveness that God extends to us, we are to extend to others. When we are deeply hurt, this command often counters all of our angry emotions—and at times even seems to border on the impossible.

Because we cannot erase memory when we forgive, the emotions of the past can reoccur like the ocean tide. Just when we think we have completely forgiven, memory and hurt return. Forgiveness is a process of continually turning painful memories over to God whenever they resurface. We can't do this on our own. Forgiveness is a supernatural act of the Holy Spirit. When we no longer desire revenge and genuinely desire good for our offender, we glorify God for giving us the grace and power to forgive.

Journal Time: Journal your thoughts

Q. How do you define forgiveness? Is forgiveness an emotion or feeling?

Q. When we are hurt, we want to hurt the one who hurt us. Why?

Q. God commands us to forgive. When we remember the pain, does this mean we have not forgiven?

Q. Do you struggle with forgiveness? Share your story. (Be careful to protect the identity of those involved.)

Part 2 : Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching moment one: We forgive others because Jesus forgave us.

Read Matthew 18:21–35. Nothing enables us to forgive like knowing in our hearts that we are forgiven. Remembering our own desperately wicked heart

(Jeremiah 17:9), evil desires, and selfish attitudes reminds us of the undeniable truth that we are all sinners that fall far short of God's magnificent holiness and glory (Romans 3:23). When we struggle to forgive someone who has wronged us, we need to remember that we are also forgiven sinners saved by the grace of God. "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). If Christ forgave us, how can we not forgive others? We draw on the same grace that God extends to us in order to forgive those who have wronged us. Forgiveness, then, becomes a supernatural act of the Holy Spirit, not something we muster up from our own human frailty. God forgives us, and he gives us the power to forgive others.

Q. What is your definition of compassion? Do you feel compassion for your abandoner? Why should remembering our own forgiven state cause us to have compassion on those who have wronged us?

When Peter asked Jesus how many times he must forgive another, he was apparently asking Jesus to put a limit on forgiveness. His question demonstrated that he did not fully grasp his own spiritual depravity and need for God's mercy and compassion.

Q. According to the Lord's Prayer, God forgives us as we forgive others (Matthew 6:12). Keeping this principle in mind, what danger is there in trying not to forgive?

Teaching moment two: Forgiveness is a process.

Read Philippians 4:5–8 and reread Matthew 18:21–22. Forgiveness is not an immediate stopping of emotion, but rather a constancy of bringing the issue to

God whenever it comes to mind. It is a heart that wants to forgive—a desire to obey God and love our erring brother. It is a spiritual battle to fight bitterness and resentment that wants to set up camp in the dark corners of our soul.

Often we are told, “Forgive and forget.” But memory does not erase just because we desire to forgive. When the memory floods our mind like a broken dike, we immediately go to the Father, asking for his grace to forgive again. This process allows us to dethrone the memory by refusing to let it control our lives. Instead of dwelling on the painful memory, we take our thoughts captive (2 Cor. 10:5) and replace them by dwelling on things that are noble, right, excellent, and praiseworthy (Phil. 4:8). This permits us to detoxify the memory so that we can purge its poison from our soul. Eventually, this process will allow our hearts to no longer wish our wrongdoer evil, but will replace our thoughts of revenge with a desire to love and pray for those who persecute us (Matt. 5:44–47). When we can honestly wish our wrongdoer well and desire good things to happen to him, we know God’s amazing grace has allowed the flood waters of painful memory to leave the rich soil of forgiveness in our hearts.

Q. What are your thoughts about the often quoted phrase, “Forgive and forget”? Is it possible to forget our past? How do we forgive if we continue to have painful memories?

Teaching moment three: Forgiveness surrenders our right to get even.

Read Romans 12:17–21. When we forgive, we surrender our right to get even, placing the outcome of the matter in God’s hands. This is exactly what Jesus did. “When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he

made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly” (1 Peter 2:23). When we trust God as judge of the earth and the avenger of evil, we are able to let go of our desire for retaliation. Paul warned the Romans to never take their own revenge, but to leave vengeance to God alone.

Q. How does plotting revenge reveal a heart that is unforgiving? Why did Paul warn us to never take our own revenge?

Q. What are subtle ways that we repay evil with evil?

Teaching moment four: Ideally, forgiving leads to reconciliation.

Read 2 Corinthians 5:18–21, Matthew 5:23–24, and Hebrews 12:14–15.

Reconciliation is the heart of God. God reconciled us to himself through Christ, and he gives us the ministry of reconciliation. As ambassadors for Christ we are to encourage people to be reconciled to God and each other. If our brother sins against us, we are to go to him and show him his fault. If he will not listen to us, we are to enlist the help of other believers.

Ideally, forgiving leads to reconciliation. Immediate reconciliation, however, is not always possible. Sometimes our offender does not desire reconciliation, or he has not changed his behavior, so we need to protect ourselves from further abuse at his hands.

The Book of Hebrews tells us to pursue peace with all men. *Pursue* is an active verb that requires diligent effort and perseverance. It implies taking the initiative toward peace. We need to be active in our pursuit of peace. This requires forgiveness and openness to reconciliation so that bitterness does not take root. Relationships that do not reconcile are more at risk for bitterness. If we

forgive, but reconciliation of the relationship is not possible, we must guard our hearts vigorously against the root of bitterness.

Q. Why is it true that there can be no reunion without forgiving, but there can be forgiving without reunion?

Part 3 : Apply Your Findings

Bitterness enslaves us to a world of hurt. Forgiveness sets us free. “Unforgiving people allow other people to control them. Setting people who have hurt you free from an old debt is to stop wanting something from them; it sets you free as well. Forgiving can lead to proactive behavior in the present, instead of passive wishes from the past.” (*Boundaries*, Zondervan, 1992)

We forgive because we are forgiven, relying upon the same grace and power to forgive that Christ extends to us. We leave the outcome of the matter to God and give up our desire to get even. We must forgive from our heart, seeking reconciliation whenever possible. When memory causes the flood of emotion to return, we once again turn it over to Christ. True forgiveness allows us to wish our wrongdoer well. We not only surrender our right to revenge against him; we desire good things to happen to him.⁴

HAGAR Phone Interviews

Once the respondents completed the study, I conducted phone conversations with them to assess their responses and the effectiveness of the

⁴ This study is adapted from Christianity Today, “Forgiving From The Heart,” *Current Issues Bible Study* (2006)

curriculum. Below is a verbatim of responses to component one: “Forgiving from the Heart.”

First Question: Please share your thoughts and comments on the forgiveness component of the bible study.

Mrs. A., the only married participant in the study, was the first participant to complete the Bible study. I called and acquired a time to have an in depth conversation about the Bible study, her feelings about it and how it affected her feelings about abandonment. On the night that we talked, she was upset about something that had happened to her earlier in the day, so in order to proceed with a discussion about the Bible study, I needed to acknowledge and address her mood. That took more time that I had anticipated, but it was necessary in order to proceed. We finally approached the Bible study topic, and I asked her to share her thoughts and comments on the forgiveness component of the curriculum.

She believed that forgiveness was forgetting about the hurt and pain caused by her husband. She said, “Well, to me, forgiveness means that I am able to forget about what my husband did and not be able to feel the hurt and pain.” She has not forgiven him yet, and relives the pain and hurt when she feels angry at something he has done.” I have not forgiven him yet. When I get mad, I really think about it and really feel all the pain and hurt.”

She is easily reminded of his indiscretion. But despite this, she continues to make a valiant effort to trust and love again in order to be a good wife. “I still try to love him despite what he did and be a good wife and keep out family together because he is sick.”

During the conversation, I assured her that forgiveness is a slow process and that forgiving does not require her to forget what her husband did. I reminded her of the reading assignment and what the author had illuminated about forgiving and forgetting. The last thing I pointed out to Mrs. A. was that as she endeavors to forgive the hurt her husband caused, she must be willing to release the past and embrace the present.

Mr. B., the only man whose wife left him while on vacation was the most difficult to reach and schedule because of his busy church schedule. In our conversation, he shared that he had some experience with the author of the forgiveness component because he read the book, "Forgiving from the heart" by Lewis Smede, who also authored this component of the Bible study. He currently uses this book to help counsel others with forgiveness issues in his church. "Well, years ago, as I went through my separation with my wife, I read Lewis Smede's book on forgiveness. It was a great book and after I went through it, I have used it ever since to counsel other's experiencing the need to forgive.

He also said that although his experience with his ex-wife was painful, he is sure that he has forgiven her although it is still difficult to talk with her because he thinks that her lifestyle is detrimental to her health. "... but I am sure that I have forgiven her at this point in my life. I do find it difficult to talk with her on the occasions that dictate it because she lives a life that is very detrimental to her health." I asked him if there was one thing he found helpful in the study and he said he felt the study was good. His words were, "I did think that the study was good."

Ms. C., whose husband left her for a friend, had not completed the study in the allotted time, and was given an additional week to complete it. I returned the call within a week's time and asked her about her thoughts on the subject of forgiveness after doing the bible study. She said that she thought the study was helpful. She sounded irritated however, and appeared to be angry with her ex-husband. She commented, "I thought the whole Bible study was good. I am still angry with my ex. He is a piss poor father and I know that I have not forgiven him for all the stuff he has done to me. "I asked her if she has forgiven him. She responded, "At first, after it happened, I really did want to forgive him. But the more I tried, the harder it got. After it didn't happen and I still have to see him and deal with him and his stupidity because of his son, I have really stopped trying to forgive him. I am still mad at him and hate to see him when I have to."

I pointed out that non-forgiveness keeps her stuck in the past and glued to the pain, and while her ex-husband has gone on with his life, she lives with the hurt and pain everyday. I asked her if he was worth the daily anger she feels? She said "no", but that she really doesn't know how to forgive. I suggested she start by utilizing one of the exercises in the study. First journal the betrayal, hurt and pain to give her pain a voice and to let it be heard. Then I suggested that she try spiritual surgery that was explained in the article. In spiritual surgery, she separates the hurt from the person. One must visualize the pain as separate from the person, instead of seeing the person as the pain. Once they are separate, see the person as someone who also needs help. Lastly, I told her that the process of forgiveness is slow, so she must work and pray about it daily. After that, she

said, “ You right, I do need to try to forgive, but it seems so hard and it takes so much of my energy!

Ms. D., the woman whose husband abandoned her while she was pregnant completed the study on time. I called and asked her insights about the study. She said, “I really thought the study was good. I tried for many years after the actual abandonment to forgive my ex-husband. It was hard and took a long time, but I can honestly say today as we speak, I have forgiven my ex.” She also commented that, “What this lesson taught me, however, is to remember that there are some other things that I need to work on forgiving. Now my biggest problem is not forgiveness, but trust.”

HAGAR Curriculum: Understanding Your Grief

The second component of the HAGAR curriculum focuses on grief and was designed to be completed on day three. It is an article⁵ that the participant should read and journal their response.

Abandonment has a grief component. In grief, there are five stages:

1. Denial-refusal to deal with the loss
2. Anger-angry about the loss
3. Bargaining- what can I do to reverse the loss?
4. Depression-sad feelings realizing the loss is real.
5. Acceptance-learning to accept the loss and move on.

⁵ This article is an excerpt by Richard Innes, *How To Mend A Broken Heart* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Revell Publishers, 2001)

Read this article and journal your feelings about the article and any grief you feel because of your abandonment.

Grief and Loss Recovery

Jeanette Lockerbie, former editor of *Psychology for Living* magazine, tells about a minister friend whose wife died suddenly. With her husband, she had been very active in the church and was dearly loved by all the church members. "I remember so well the church announcement of her funeral service: 'Come, and wear your brightest colors as we celebrate her home going,'" Lockerbie reported.

"Fine. This congregation was just following the teaching this minister had given them for a score of years. Everyone did the 'right' thing: the minister bore up admirably and 'celebrated' with his people the death of his life partner. "Months later, I happened to be a guest in the home where this minister was also visiting. I scarcely recognized the ghost of a man he had become. His deep sorrow at the snatching away of his loved wife, suppressed in the interest of 'Christian' expectations of him, had worked its devastation in his life, both physically and emotionally." His "brave front" was nothing but a mask to hide his true feelings. Such masks are deadening.

Some time ago in an article in *The Reader's Digest*, John Kord Lagemann tells about another minister's reaction to death: "Recently the minister of our church had to carry tragic news to the parents of a twelve-year-old boy. Their son had drowned on a school outing. Later, the parents told me, 'The minister

didn't preach or tell us to be brave. He broke into tears and wept with us. We will always love him for that.”

To hide behind a brave front in
times of deep sorrow is to set one's
self up for greater trauma ahead.

It is obvious to see which of the two ministers acted in the healthiest manner. Emotions are God given. In denying them we rob ourselves of spontaneity and seriously affect our emotional and physical health as well as damage our relationships. As John Lagemann put it, without emotions life would be like “playing a trombone with a stuck slide!”

In giving us emotions God also gave us ways to express them. He gave laughter to express joy, words to express anger, and tears to express sorrow. At the grave of his good friend, Lazarus, Jesus wept openly and unashamedly.

“Weep with those who weep” is God's practical and healthy advice.

Grief can be caused not only by the loss of a loved one, but also by the loss of a job, a home, one's savings, a loved family pet, or anything of value. With any of these losses, the natural response is to grieve—which may include a mixture of reactions and emotions, all of which need to be worked through and resolved. Grieving is not a quick-fix simple event, but a process that can take weeks or many months depending on the significance of the loss. The following are stages that need to be worked through to bring resolution:

First, accept the reality of what has happened. At times of deep loss there is often denial. This couldn't have happened to me. It's just a bad dream, the mind reasons, and blots out the reality of the situation. As difficult as it may be, to resolve grief it is essential to accept whatever loss has occurred. I know one

man who was divorced 20 years ago. His former wife has long since remarried, but he is still living in a fantasy world with the dream that she is going to come back to him. As much as God (and the rest of us) hate divorce, and while miracles are possible, the likelihood of this woman coming back to this man is highly unrealistic. Until he accepts the finality of his situation, he'll stay stuck in the place where he has been for the past 20 years!

Second, realize that it is normal to hurt deeply at a time of loss. Give yourself permission to cry. It is one way of draining the pain of sorrow and loss. As long as our feelings are bottled up, we can't think clearly, we numb out, and get stuck—that is, we can't get on with our lives. Only after we discharge our painful emotions in healthy ways are we freed to pick up the pieces of our lives and return to meaningful living.

Some societies are much healthier when it comes to grieving. The Dani people in Irian Jaya, for example, says former missionary Elise Wight, weep and wail openly for several days when a loved one dies. We, too, need to weep out our pain. It is absolutely essential for healing. As Jesus taught, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." Only as we mourn our loss do we find comfort.

Third, accept feelings of loneliness, fear of being alone, and a sense of hopelessness as normal following the loss of a loved one. What is there left to live for, some feel. Forcing yourself to stay involved in former activities you enjoyed and going out and mixing with friends as soon as possible is very important. Equally important is to join a support group—with others who are also suffering loss. None of us can make it alone. We all need the support of loving,

understanding friends, especially during times of grief and sadness. As the Bible teaches us, “Bear ... one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”

Fourth, there may also be feelings of guilt, especially if there has been a suicide or some kind of preventable accident. Why didn't I do more for her/him? If only I'd been more understanding. It's my fault? All are thoughts that can haunt. I talked with one man whose wife committed suicide six months earlier. This man felt he was to blame. Like all of us, I'm sure he could have done some things differently, but he wasn't responsible for his wife's action. Suicide was her choice. His guilt was false. He may need professional counseling to help him see and resolve this.

Fifth, another common emotion in grief is anger. We may feel angry at the person for leaving us, or at our boss for firing us, or at God for allowing our loss to happen. Anger can be difficult to admit, especially when directed at someone we loved very much—or at God! If there is anger, it is essential to acknowledge and express it in healthy ways. If it's repressed, full recovery isn't possible and can lead to depression and/or physical sickness.

Give yourself permission to cry.
It is one way of draining the
pain of sorrow and loss.

I read about one woman whose two sisters died tragically. She announced to the rest of the family, “There is no God. I don't believe in Him anymore.” This woman was understandably angry at God, but instead of telling Him how she felt, she rejected Him. God doesn't get upset when we are angry at Him. He knows it anyhow and He understands. The healthy thing to do is to tell Him how we feel so we can resolve these feelings. Otherwise we will stuff them and

become physically ill, depressed, bored, withdrawn, or take out our hurt on others.

In Psalm 109 David expressed his angry feelings to the Lord against those who were accusing him falsely. He prayed, “O God, whom I praise, do not remain silent, for wicked and deceitful men have opened their mouths against me; they have spoken against me with lying tongues. With words of hatred they surround me; they attack me without cause.” And then he poured out the bitter feelings he held toward these people, after which he prayed, “Help me, O LORD my God; save me in accordance with your love.” It can be very helpful for us to do the same.

Finally, give yourself time to heal. After accepting and dealing with your painful feelings, which may take weeks or even months, refuse to keep living in the past. Live for the present and the future. Do something that will help others. Remember, it is God's will that we recover and use our pain as a means to promote growth. This can better equip us to minister to others who grieve. He wants to help us—and will—as we open our life to Christ and daily commit and trust ourselves to him, as his word says: “Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you.”

HAGAR Phone Interviews

Question: Did you recognize the signs of grief during your abandonment experience and are you still experiencing grief currently?

Mrs. A. said: "I really didn't know that I was grieving, but after looking at them, I am still kind of angry but I am also very depressed too. I have come to the point that I accept his relationship with my sister, but it hurts me and I get depressed when I think about it." I told her that it is normal to feel hurt from painful memories, and that there is no time limit on progressing through the stages, it could take months or years. The time it takes is dependant on the individual.

Mr. B. responded that: "Shortly after my wife left, I recognized that I was grieving. I have gone through all of the stages over the ten years she has been gone, and I am not grieving at all right now." I asked him if he had any counseling for himself during his abandonment experience, and he responded, "I was privy to other pastors who were able to pray with me and give me words of wisdom. I am very grateful for their help."

Ms. C. did not know that she experienced grief of any kind during or after her abandonment experience. This was new information to her. She responded to my question: "Naw, that was new information to me. I thought that you grieve when someone dies, but that's all. It is good to know because I don't feel bad now that I know that it is o.k. to feel the way I feel. I asked her what stage did she think she was in currently. She said, "Well, I know he's gone, and ain't nothing I can do about that, so I guess I have accepted it, but I am still hurt and mad at the way he did it and with who. I am really trying though to move on with my life. I don't want to be stuck on him, but having to have contact with him makes it bad." I assured her that grief has no expiration date and that the stages can be cyclical, where she can progress through one and still have feeling

of another. I suggested that she involve herself in activities that allow her to fully experience the stage she is in and heal as she progresses through them all.

Ms. D. also did not recognize the grief stages in her abandonment experience. She commented that: "I did not recognize all of the stages of grief, I did not know them. I knew I was depressed and that I was grieving, but I didn't know what stage or anything." She also says, "I am not experiencing grief right now in any way because he left me. What does grieve me is that he does not have an active part in his daughter's life."

HAGAR Curriculum: Where Do We Get Self Worth?

The third component of the HAGAR curriculum focuses on the concept of self worth. This component consists of a reading assignment (article) followed by accompanying questions to be completed on days four and five. What follows is a copy of the questions⁶. The accompanying article is located in the appendix. The leading question is: In a culture that idolizes physical beauty and physique, where do we find our personal worth?

When physical beauty, intelligence, athletic ability, or talent is the basis for self-esteem, the average person can have feelings of inferiority, emptiness, longing, and worthlessness. Shea. M. Gregory, in an article for TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMEN, humorously shared her struggles with feelings of

⁶ This study is adapted from Christianity Today, "Where Do We Get Self Worth" *Today's Christian Woman Series* (2005)

inadequacy and unworthiness. She ultimately realized her value was not based on physical appearance, but on God's love and sacrifice for her. This, in turn, helped her to focus on the inner beauty that God develops in his children, rather than the outward appearance seen by man.

Upon what should our self-worth be based? What gives us value as human beings? How can we focus on inner beauty in a culture seemingly obsessed with physical beauty? Is it possible to find our worth in God alone?

Part 1 : Identify the Current Issue

When we compare ourselves to others, or a culturally perfect standard of acceptance, we can begin to have doubts about our own worth and acceptability. The term self-esteem is usually used to define how we view ourselves. *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines it as "pride in oneself." Our culture stresses the importance of building self-esteem, saying we need to build ourselves up in pride to feel good about who we are. We attempt to do this by self-improvement methods. However, this often leads to discrepancy between who we are and who we want to be, and our views about ourselves can actually be diminished. Current trends of extreme makeovers, liposuction, plastic surgery, Botox, and airbrushed supermodels can add to our dissatisfaction.

As believers, we need to focus neither on our self-esteem nor pride in our abilities, accomplishments, or outward physique, but rather on our self-worth and value as seen through the lens of God's Word.

READ ACCOMPANYING ARTICLE AND COMPLETE QUESTIONS BELOW⁷

Journal Time: Journal your thoughts

Q. What do you think gives a person value? Explain your answer.

Q. With what issues of self-esteem or self-worth have you struggled? What gives you feelings of self-worth, self-acceptance, or worthiness? Is there a common thread of experience that leads to these positive feelings?

Part 2: Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching moment one: God affirms us by loving us unconditionally.

Read Isaiah 43:1–4, Romans 5:8, and Romans 8:37–39. Shea M. Gregory says that in her struggle with self-esteem, she yelled at her brother, “What do I have to do to get a little affirmation around here?!” All of us long for affirmation that we are valuable and loved. In the search for this affirmation that we are loved, however, we can fall into the trap of attempting to make ourselves acceptable or worthy. What Shea Gregory found is true for us as well. God loves us unconditionally. He loves us even with all of our faults. He loves us with an unending love, and nothing can ever separate us from that love. He loved us enough to die for us. In that great love of God, we can find our true worth. Our value is not in what we look like, how smart we are, or how many muscles we have developed. We don’t have to have strong abs, perfect teeth, or buns of steel. We have value because God says we do. We are precious to him and honored. He loved us enough to go to the cross to die for us; because of that we know we are valuable and loved.

Q. In longing to be loved and affirmed, with what fears do you struggle? What behaviors did these fears make you do?

⁷ This article is located in the appendix.

Q. How did your abandonment experience make you feel about yourself? Did it lower your self-esteem?

Q. Why is it important for us to know God calls us by name? What does it mean, in Isaiah 43, that we are his? How does this make you feel?

Teaching moment two: God made us, and all his works are wonderful.

Read Psalm 139:1–18. David said we were knit or woven together by God in our mother's womb, and that God's eyes were on our unformed body. These words imply a step-by-step process that demonstrates God's attention to detail. Our Creator loves us so intimately that he cares about every detail in our lives. He knows what we are doing every moment of every day. He understands our thoughts and is familiar with all our ways, including our habits, idiosyncrasies, and motives. He knows what we are going to say before we do, and anywhere we go he is already there.

God is holy and perfect in all he does. He makes no mistakes; yet often we, his creatures, look at ourselves and are displeased with what he created. Psalm 139 tells us we are “fearfully and wonderfully made.” David said he knew that “full well.” Today's generation does not seem to have that same assurance that we are created well. Instead of believing the world's image, which points out what they see as flaws, we should believe God's truth that we are wonderfully made. God made us all uniquely and creatively, yet we seem to strive to fit the idea of beauty imagined by man. Not only does this criticize God's work, but it lowers our feelings of self-worth.

Q. How would life be different if we accepted each other the way God created us, believing that we were “fearfully and wonderfully made”? How would we feel differently about ourselves?

Teaching moment three: God does not focus on our earthy bodies, which are temporal and quickly wither and fade, but on our souls, which are eternal.

Read 1 Samuel 16:1–13. God looks past our exterior to the inner issues of the heart. He focuses on our thoughts, motives, and intentions. He cares about developing our souls, which are eternal, much more than he cares about our physical appearance, which he says quickly withers like grass. Do we have a heart that wants to follow and obey him? Do we love him with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength? Do we love others as much as we do ourselves? Do we use the attributes, talents, and skills he has given us to puff ourselves up or to glorify him and love and help others? The inner beauty of a soul that seeks hard after God will last for eternity.

Q. Why do humans focus so much attention on the outward appearance? What specific physical characteristics do we see as important, and why? What are your thoughts about your physical appearance after your abandonment experience?

Q. How can remembering that God looks at our heart, not our outward appearance, help us in our feelings of self-worth?

Teaching moment four: Fear of failure, lack of confidence, and procrastination are all by-products of low self-worth that can keep us from accomplishing God’s will in our lives.

Read Exodus 4:1–17. In this passage, Moses struggled with fear of failure, lack of confidence, and feelings of inadequacy. These strong emotions kept him from accomplishing what God wanted him to do. First, Moses dealt with fear of not being believed or respected, and then he focused on his physical limitations. When Moses told God his list of reasons about why he could not possibly accomplish all God wanted, God did not try to convince Moses that he didn't have inadequacies, nor did he tell him to work on improving his inadequacies before God could use him. Instead, God reminded Moses that he knew all about his shortcomings, because he had made him, and that he was capable of working out any difficulties Moses faced. God promised to help Moses. Moses, however, continued to focus on his inadequacies despite God's reassurances.

God is not limited by our inadequacies. Moses was focused on completing the task in his own strength, instead of relying on God to accomplish his plan. When our fears are stronger than our trust in God, we are disobedient.

Q. What fear of failure did Moses have? What feelings of inadequacy did he deal with? Why do you think he was lacking in confidence?

Q. How can our dissatisfaction with ourselves or lack of confidence keep us from God's blessings?

Part 3 : Apply Your Findings

When we focus on loving God and others rather than thinking about ourselves, our feelings of inadequacy and inferiority diminish. Feelings of inferiority or lack of self-confidence can keep us from the work God has called us to do. When we rely on God's strength instead of our own, we will use our talents, abilities, and all God has given us for his glory.

Q. What blessings have you missed because you have allowed your feelings of inadequacy because of being abandoned keep you from all that God has for you?

HAGAR Phone Interviews

First Question: What are your thoughts about the self-esteem section and how did it help you?

Mrs. A. said that: "My self-esteem was good before (husband's name) started to fool around with my sister. I didn't have any problem with the way I was. After he slept with her, I started to wonder if he thought something was wrong. I have gained 30 pounds since he first told me he didn't love me anymore. Now I think something is wrong, and I think it is his fault." I asked her how does knowing that she was "beautifully and wonderfully made" by God make her feel? She said: "I really wish that everybody thought that about me. I think that I am o.k. I can't really say that I am beautiful but I hope to one day think that about myself."

Mr. B. responded: "I do suffer from low self-esteem, even though I am not sure how much I attribute that to my ex-wife. I have gained quite a bit of weight, and I am very self-conscious about that. My weight gain happened after the divorce of my second wife and the stress of changing parishes. I am going to do something about my weight because I am getting older, but I feel good about myself otherwise." I asked what insights he gained from this section. He said, "It was great to be reminded of God's unconditional love."

Ms. C. said: “ I really like myself. I had just lost some baby weight. He didn’t leave me because I was fat, he was just a dog. My shape is better than his new woman’s. Now, I have gained weight because I just seem to be under so much stress. I’m eating a lot of fast food now and don’t have time to exercise anymore. But I do feel real good about myself.” I asked if she learned anything from this component of the study and she said,” Yeah, I never thought that Moses has low self-esteem. I need to go back and read about him again.”

Ms. D. responded: “ I have seemingly had so many abandonment experiences, that I did at one time believe that there was something wrong with me- like a personality flaw or something.” I asked if she had low self esteem? She said, “I think that I do have low self-esteem about my body. I have to stop watching so much TV. I asked her what she found most beneficial about this component, and she said,” Well, it was clear from the article that all people experience insecurities and inadequacies. The author of the article was hilarious and very thought provoking.”

The responses appear to support both the theological and biblical warrants for this project. They seem to agree with the postulate that Hagar did not have a liberation experience as much as God empowered her to see resources that she did not see at first. He provided the survival skills necessary for her to survive and care for her young child as a single parent abandoned in the wilderness. My last task with the participants was to discover God’s empowerment for survival in their abandonment experience.

Second Question: How do you feel God empowered you to survive through your abandonment experience?

Ms. A. said: “I do think that God empowered me because I didn’t commit suicide. I believe I was stopped by angels from doing something that would really hurt my daughter forever.” Mr. B. said that: “God empowered me by providing people who supported and counseled me through the dark time of separation and divorce. I was also blessed to be able to have custody of my two daughters and son, which forced me to focus on them and their well being. I did not have time to focus on my hurts and pains for long.”

Ms. C. stated that: “God helped me by letting me keep working to take care of my kids. I know that what happened was allowed by God. I don’t understand why it happened to me, but He knows, and there was a reason. And Ms. D. says: “I was empowered because I was given the time and space to experience the tremendous grief and anger against my ex husband in a safe environment. I was clinically depressed and as strange as it sounds, I was so depressed, that I could not think about suicide.

Summary

I concluded the implementation of the HAGAR curriculum after the phone assessments by a final questionnaire to determine whether the curriculum may have had any positive effects on the participants’ perceptions on abandonment. They were instructed to complete the questionnaire within three days of its arrival and return it to the researcher. Because of the length of the

questionnaire, the respondents did not complete it in the time allotted, so many phone calls, email reminders and messages had to be left for their return.

Analysis of the post-test questionnaires unfortunately did not yield responses significantly different from the pre-test. One exception was Mrs. A., and Mr. B. Mrs. A., who decided that the pain of her marriage was too great for her and she has decided to separate from her husband. When asked her feelings about her abandonment experience after completing the questionnaire, she states that: "I wanted to make my marriage work for my daughter, but I can't take it anymore. I am looking to leave and start over. I don't think I will ever get married again or trust a man again." Mr. B. came to an epiphany about his life and seems to have hit a rock bottom moment. He says in his post-test when asked whether he had abandoned before:

"Yes. Sadly, I have encouraged relationships with several wonderful women with no sincere intent in pursuing it to the extent they are expecting. This abominable act on my behalf has hurt several women. I have enjoyed the company of women selfishly. I need to surrender a major self-delusion – namely, the notion that I am basically a good man with a good heart, who would not intentionally hurt anyone. It is not so. I am not a good man; my heart is exceedingly evil; and I have left a trail of deep hurts done to people I professed to love. , I did so knowingly, self-servingly, but convincing myself that the reason I did not slam the door to the future was that I didn't want to break their hearts. It wasn't their hearts I was concerned about; it was my own ego and physical needs. I unceremoniously "dumped" them. But, in truth, in each case I never ended the relationships cleanly and honestly. But I need to deal with my heart, which is deceitful and exceptionally cruel. I need to be real and acknowledge, before God and others, that I am not a good man. And again, because I have avoided scandal, have not jumped in the sack with any married women, and have not been promiscuous, I have deluded myself into thinking that I was a pretty nice guy. It's not so; I am not a nice guy ... I am not a good man.

Side by side comparisons of the other two post-test's yielded virtually the same responses and were disappointing. They either did not complete the post-test, or their perceptions remained unchanged after working through the HAGAR curriculum.

By reviewing this data, several questions emerge: Why did the post-test for two participants remained unchanged? Was the post-test too much of a task to complete after the five day curriculum? Was the HAGAR curriculum satisfactory to meet the needs of people who have experienced abandonment trauma and lastly, was the administration of the curriculum conducive for the life change expected by the researcher? These questions, along with judgments on the effectiveness of this project, suggestions on possible recourse for improving its effectiveness and what role the Black Church may play in mediating the interaction between this study and the participants in the case study will be addressed.

CHAPTER FIVE

ABANDONMENT EXPLAINED: REFLECTION AND SUMMARY OF THE HAGAR CURRICULUM

The purpose and hypothesis of the Hagar Project: Healing Anger, Grief and Resentment for the empowerment of abandoned women was to identify the feelings of anger, grief and resentment in victims of abandonment trauma and offer empowerment through the Hagar curriculum, a biblical and counseling perspective on healing and wholeness, to the lives of each participant. After careful evaluation of the data generated from the participant responses, assumptions that supported the hypothesis were unsubstantiated.

The researcher had a passionate interest in pursuing the effects of abandonment trauma in women while participating in the, “Black Church, Social and Civic Empowerment”, focus group at United Theological Seminary’s Doctor of Ministry program because of her personal experience of abandonment. Despite her enthusiasm, she however, did not have the clinical counseling experience necessary to initiate a bible curriculum and intervention to address the emotionally charged emotions of anger, grief and resentment. From this flawed origin, the implementation and results of the curriculum followed. In the following paragraphs are reflections on the successes and failures of the Hagar curriculum.

Reflections

In the study, most of the respondents struggled to express the kind of hurt, pain or trauma they experienced and continue to experience as an after effect of abandonment. The most common feeling expressed by all the participants was often a deep hurt and sadness as they reflected on their current feelings about their abandonment experience. They all expressed anger, but not to the degree anticipated by the hypothesis. Also, depending on *when* the abandonment experience occurred, their grief was also not as great as expected. Most of the respondents did, at some level, still experience some resentment towards their abandoner, which was expected by the hypothesis.

It was evident by analyzing the data that the respondents were in different places in their abandonment experiences, and thus all felt strongly about different areas. Some were very angry, while others had forgiven and admitted the memories were sad or bitter sweet. It was most evident that revisiting this topic exposed hurts and pains, and opened wounds that the researcher felt unqualified to provide adequate intervention because of the lack of clinical counseling.

Revisions

The greatest success of the HAGAR curriculum was empowering each participant with an awareness that abandonment is insidious and has residual effects in their lives. It also gave them elementary knowledge about the possible effects of abandonment and the power to seek more qualified help if they felt so

inclined. It was also very successful in giving the participants an opportunity to give their pain of abandonment a voice, an expression, something that many hurting people do not have.

Acknowledging the successes of this program, it could be improved by several modifications for future implementation. At the onset of the program, changes occurred within the ministry context that affected the administration of the curriculum. Instead of implementing the curricula in a church setting as originally planned by the researcher, it became a self-study course to be completed in the comfort of the participant's home. This context change was significant because it removed the group or community dynamic from the participants, where people with similar experiences and feelings encourage each other. It also removed the control the researcher had to address the participant's feelings in person, encourage the completion of the study, obtain the data in a timely manner and lessen the feeling of isolation that one already feels in an abandonment situation.

The questionnaire, which served as both pre and post-test, necessary in assessing the data needed to support or discredit the hypothesis could be improved upon by soliciting professional help. The time constraints of this program did not allow for that, therefore, the data collected was not as thorough as the researcher preferred because both pre and post-test yielded similar results. A reason for this could be attributed to the length of the Hagar curriculum. The participants became tired and did not embrace the completion of the study wholeheartedly.

Participants also had a difficult time finding time to complete the study, and that caused a time delay in analyzing the data. The researcher could not be

certain if the participants actually completed the curriculum, because it was not collected as a part of the data analysis. The researcher also had a difficult time scheduling the phone conference component that reviewed the contents of the bible study with each participant, also contributing to the delay in data collection and analysis. For future implementation, the participants would be given a journal to complete so that the leader could ensure that the curriculum was completed.

Another modification would suggest The HAGAR curriculum be conducted in the context of a church or small group setting; it should not be a self-study course; the participants should have a face-to-face interaction with the researcher instead of phone and email contact. The questionnaire and the biblical curriculum also require collaboration with mental health professionals to address the array of emotions that can be elicited when reliving the hurt and pain of abandonment trauma.

How does the HAGAR Curriculum speak to The Black Church?

This curriculum was designed for the Black church as a means to address the concerns of its most precious commodity, the black woman. Far too long, black women have been relegated to second-class citizenship in American society and find no different in the often-patriarchal structure of the Black church. Because black women not only form the backbone to the black family structure, she also forms the backbone to the black church. These facts attribute to her a tremendous amount of strength, perseverance and super-human-ness. She then,

is expected to handle the trials of life without missing a beat. I recognized that black women in my church context were hurting and the church had nothing in place to specifically address these pains. We would pray for them, and give them a plethora of “old grandma” wisdom and biblical clichés. This however, did not eliminate their physical and emotional needs. This program was the beginning of structuring a curricula made by and for the black woman. This curriculum is the beginning for the researcher in an attempt to develop and provide a culturally sensitive biblical perspective for black women in the black church.

In order for the Black church to serve as an agency of healing, it must purpose to serve the whole congregation, including men, women and children with relevant and pertinent information from the pulpit and through programs and activities for the community. It must realize that the concept of “wholeness” comprises mind, body and spirit and refuse to perpetuate the fragmentation that the scientific era purports. It must also recognize the “call” and responsibility it has in providing a community capable of providing healing that transforms because people are drawn to the Black church seeking a place of support in their quest for personal transformation.

My story and the story of the participants is one of pain and betrayal. It is critical not to judge or antagonize a hurting person. The religiosity and self-righteousness of some members can weigh heavily upon the psyche of a hurting person. The three friends of Job offer a wonderful paradigm for this; before they critiqued Job and his predicament, they came, they sat and they mourned with Job silently. This teaching has to be given from the pulpit so that the entire congregation is able to be sensitive and empathetic to those grieving.

The Black church can learn much from Womanist theology and the Hagar story about empowering women by changing the patriarchal and androcentric views that govern its structure and polity. Because the Black church is comprised of more women than men, it must begin to investigate and discuss the issues that oppress black women like abandonment by a significant other, where her economic, financial, emotional and spiritual integrity is disrupted. Preachers must preach messages of empowerment to women from the pulpit, focusing on issues from both a male and a female perspective to empower the whole congregation. Preachers must also address biblical truths from a woman's perspective.

It is also important to avoid subjugating women's issues to a weekly "women's group" that discusses issues that are not pertinent to the lives of the women congregants. These groups, offered to give women an opportunity to participate in church life are often impotent in providing or addressing women's real concerns. Also, most groups are lead by lay leaders who have no experience or qualifications to professionally address the real life, down and dirty issues that women face today, i.e. alcoholism, drugs, spousal abuse, mental health issues, under employment. In addition to the unqualified leadership, these groups never have full attention or input from the pastor. We need to enlist qualified professional counseling for these groups, even networking and collaborating with the community so that these groups can empower women by identifying and properly dealing with the issues to ensure a transformative experience .

The Black church has always been the epicenter throughout history for the empowerment of black people. In that light, it should continue to grow and equip itself to provide services that can benefit and heal the community in which it resides. Empowerment lies in the ministerial vision of Jesus; he healed the sick, brought liberation to the oppressed and marginalized and reinforced grace where the law was tyrannical. Using Jesus as its model, the Black church must function as a change/liberating agent in the community. It is not only Black women in the church who experience crippling and debilitating experiences, so the Black church can foster healing of the community by developing and offering services that are healing and that address issues that have long been considered insignificant.

It can accomplish this task by forming alliances within the wider community and partnering with community leaders, professionals and social agencies to cooperate and collaborate in providing professional services to address the needs to the community - i.e. mental health resources. The Black church must open its doors to provide services and programs like the Hagar project, which seeks to provide a curriculum that will provide healing and transformation for abandonment. When the Black church takes its rightful place as leader in providing these services for the women who have toiled to make it the great institution it is, then it will continue to empower the community, which will in turn empower the city and eventually the nation.

APPENDIX A

**PARTICIPANTS PRE AND POST TEST:
INSTRUCTION FOR IMPLEMENTATION**

Dear Participant,

Please accept this gift of five dollars as a way of saying "*thank you*" in advance for taking the time to participate in and complete this questionnaire.

As you engage the questions, please arrange a time when you can answer each question as honestly and thoroughly as possible. Use as much or as little space as needed to convey your feelings. Express yourself in the language and terms you feel comfortable with. Your character is not being "*judged*" by your responses.

Please use the enclosed "self addressed stamped envelope" to return the questionnaire within **ten (10) days of receipt.**

Remember, your identity will be kept anonymous, but the responses will be utilized to collect data for the HAGAR Project.

If you need more space, please add additional pages and place the question number before the response.

APPENDIX B

HAGAR: HEALING ANGER, GRIEF AND RESENTMENT SUPPORTING ARTILES NOT INCLUDED IN CHAPTER FOUR

Article One

Forgiving from the Heart

How do we know we have truly forgiven?¹

Forgiveness—The Power to Change the Past

To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you.

By Lewis B. Smedes, for the study, "Forgiveness—The Power to Change the Past.

Two anxieties dominate most of our lives. We are anxious in the face of our unchangeable past; we long to recreate segments of our private histories, but we are stuck with them. We are anxious in the face of our unpredictable futures; we long to control our destinies, but we cannot bring them under our management. Thus, two basic longings, lying at the root of most others, are frustrated: we cannot alter a painful past or control a threatening future.

God offers two answers to our deepest anxieties. He is a forgiving God who recreates our pasts by forgiving them. He is a promising God who controls our future by making and keeping promises. By forgiving us, he changes our past. By promising, he secures our future.

By his grace we participate in his power to change the past and control the future. We, too, can forgive, and must forgive. We, too, can make a promise and keep it. Indeed, by sharing these two divine powers, we become most powerfully human and most wonderfully free.

Toward the end of her almost epochal book, *The Human Condition* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1958), the Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt turns finally to these two neglected powers of the human spirit, concluding that only when we act after the fashion of the biblical Lord can we overcome our darkest forebodings. There is, she says, only one remedy for the inevitability of history: forgiveness. And in the next chapter she says there is only one way to overcome the unpredictabilities of the future: to make promises and keep the promises we make.

¹ This article is adapted from Christianity Today, "Forgiving from the Heart," *Current Issues Bible Study* (2006)

These two powers of the human spirit are, I believe, two things necessary to keep life human. If we lose the art of forgiving, and if we lose the power of promising, we will let life become brutish. To the extent that we let these divine gifts atrophy, we will forfeit the right to be called children of God.

I want to take a close look at how we practice these human shares in God's powers. In the next issue I plan to poke about in the mystery of the making and the keeping of promises. Here I shall look into the human act of forgiving—not God's forgiving so much as our own, and not being forgiven so much as the act of forgiving.

The only remedy for the inevitability of history, says Arendt, is forgiveness. She means that in the natural course of things we are stuck with our past and its effects on us. We may learn from our history, but we cannot escape it. We may forget our history, but we cannot undo it. We may be doomed to repeat our history, but we cannot change it. Our history is an inevitable component of our being. One thing only can release us from the grip of our history. That one thing is forgiveness.

Taking Arendt seriously, we have sound reason for revisiting this human potential. But Jesus, far earlier, urges a still more compelling reason, not merely for thinking about but for praying for the power of forgiving. In words that some resentful demon in me would rather ignore, Jesus tells us that if we do not forgive our fellows, we should not expect God to forgive us (Mark 11:25). Here is even more reason, then, to try to rescue forgiving from the cluster of clichés that often obscure the outrageously free and the offensively gracious act by which one human being forgives another.

What do we do when we forgive? I see three stages in every act of forgiving: suffering, spiritual surgery, and starting over. The first stage, suffering, creates the conditions that require forgiveness. At the second stage we do the essential business of forgiveness; the forgiver performs spiritual surgery in his own memory. We complete the action and bring it to its climax at the third stage, when the forgiver starts over in a new relationship with the forgiven person.

Suffering

No one really forgives unless he has been hurt. We turn the miracle into a cheap indulgence when we pretend to forgive people who have never hurt us. I do not mean that you can forgive only scoundrels who laid a hand on you. You can be hurt when you suffer at the hands of people you love. But unless you are hurt, speak of something other than forgiving.

But not every hurt needs to be forgiven. There are some hurts that we can swallow, shrug off, and chalk up to the risks of being earthen vessels in a crowded world. We should not try to forgive when all we need is simply a little spiritual generosity. Consider the following hurts:

Annoyances. People annoy us by being late for appointments, by telling boring stories at dinner, and by cutting in front of us at the checkout stand.

Defeats. Some people succeed when we fail; they get promotions when we are ignored; they get the glittering prizes we want; they always seem to be there ahead of us—and to make things worse, these people who beat us are our friends.

Slights. People we want to notice us ignore us; professors we adored forget our names two years after graduation; pastors we love never invite us into their special circle; and the boss does not even invite us to his daughter's wedding.

These are all hurts, but they are not the kind that need forgiving. Such bits and pieces of suffering require tolerance, magnanimity, indulgence, humility—but not forgiving!

The kinds of hurts that need forgiving are both deep and moral. They are deep because they slice the fiber that holds us together in a human relationship. They are moral because they are wrongful, unfair, intolerable. We cannot indulge them or ignore them; we cannot shrug them off. We cannot just chalk them up to the human condition. The sorts of hurts that need forgiving are the ones that tend, in the nature of the case, to build a wall between the wrongdoer and the person he wrongfully hurts.

There are two kinds of hurts that must be answered with the miracle of forgiving. They are acts of disloyalty and acts of betrayal. Maybe there are hurts that need forgiveness that do not fit these categories, but most do.

What is a disloyal act? A person is disloyal if he treats you as a stranger when, in fact, he belongs to you as a friend or partner. Each of us is bound to some special others by the invisible fibers of loyalty. The bonding tells us who we are: we are who we are, most deeply, because of the people we belong to. This is why disloyalty is so serious. When someone who belongs to us treats us like a stranger, he digs a ditch; and he builds a wall between the two of us. And in doing so he assaults our very identity. Words like “abandon,” or “forsake,” or “let down” come to mind:

- A husband has an affair with his wife's friend.
- A partner who promised to come through with a loan reneges at the last moment when he can make a better profit with his money elsewhere.
- A friend who promised to recommend you for promotion lets you down when he discovers you are out of favor with the boss.
- Your father fails to show up when you are given a coveted award.
- Your neighbor spurns you when you, a Jew, need a place to hide from the Gestapo.

These examples all have the same painful feature: someone who belongs to you by some spoken or unspoken promise treats you like a stranger.

Turn the screw a little tighter, and disloyalty becomes betrayal. As disloyalty makes strangers of people who belong to each other, betrayal turns them into enemies. We are disloyal when we let people down. We betray them when we cut them in pieces.

- Peter was disloyal when he denied he ever knew the Lord.
- Judas betrayed Jesus when he turned him over to his enemies.
- You betray me when you take a secret I trusted with you and reveal it to someone who is likely to use it against me.
- You betray me when you promise to be my friend but whisper my secret shame to a gossip.
- You betray me when you are my brother but you put me down in front of significant people before whom I have no defense.
- A son betrays his father when he tells the police commissar that the father prayed for the defeat of communism.

These examples all have the same painful feature: someone who is committed to be on your side turns against you as an enemy.

Here are moral wrongs, wrongs people do out of evil intent, wrongs that cannot be tolerated. They are the wrongs that face us with the crisis of forgiveness. We should not flatten forgiveness to fit just any painful moment. The moment of forgiving comes when someone who ought to be with you forsakes you, when someone who ought to be for you turns against you.

Spiritual surgery

The second stage of forgiving involves the hurt person's inner response to the one who wronged him. Though it happens in the mind and heart of the forgiver, it may not even be felt by the person he forgives—at least not immediately. Here the forgiver performs spiritual surgery within his or her own memory.

When you forgive someone, you slice away the wrong from the person who did it. You disengage that person from his hurtful act. You recreate him. At one moment you identify him inerradically as the person who did you wrong. The next moment you change that identity. He is remade in your memory.

You think of him now not as the person who hurt you, but as a person who needs you. You feel him now not as the person who alienated you, but as the person who belongs to you. Once you branded him as a person powerful in evil, but now you see him as a person weak in his needs. You recreated your past by recreating the person whose wrong made your past painful.

You do not change him, out there, in his being. What he did sticks to what he is. His wrong is glued to him. But when you recreate him in your own memory, there, within you, he has been altered by spiritual surgery.

God does it this way, too. He releases us from sin as a mother washes dirt from a child's face, or as a person takes a burden off your back, lays it on a goat, and sends the goat scampering into the wilderness. The Bible's metaphors point to a surgery within God's memory of what we are.

Sometimes this stage is as far as we can go. Sometimes we need to forgive people who are dead and gone. Sometimes we need to forgive people who do not want our forgiveness. Sometimes our forgiving has to end with what happens in the spiritual surgery of our memories.

Starting over

The miracle of forgiveness is completed when two alienated people start over again. A man holds out his hand to an alienated daughter and says, "I want to be your father again." A woman holds out her hand and says, "I want to be your wife again." Or, "I want to be your friend again, your partner again. Let us be reconciled; let us belong together again."

Reconciliation is the personal reunion of people who were alienated but belong together. It is the beginning of a new journey together. We must begin where we are, not at an ideal place for reunion: We do not understand what happened. Loose ends are untied. Nasty questions are unanswered. The future is uncertain; we have more hurts and more forgiving ahead of us. But we start over where we are.

If we keep the wonder of forgiving in our minds, we will not confuse this miracle with lesser gestures that pass as forgiveness. There are a few acts that may look like forgiving but which are, in fact, very different from that miracle of forgiving.

Forgiving is not forgetting. We forget things willy-nilly. We forget some hurts because they were too trivial to remember. We forget other hurts because they were too terrible to remember: All we need to forget is a bad memory or a compulsion to suppress. We do the miracle when we remember and then forgive.

Forgiving is not excusing. We excuse people when we understand that they are not to blame for the wrong they did us. When you understand that I have a Y where an X is supposed to be in my genetic code, you will not judge me. When you know that I got to be the way I am because I was walloped into neuroses by a wacky mother, you will not blame me. You will say: What he did was foul, but he is not to blame. This is not forgiving. Forgiving happens only when we refuse to excuse: We forgive only when we blame beforehand.

Forgiving is not smoothing things over. Some people make careers out of smoothing things over. Mothers shush us and smother our conflicts: They keep the lid on our suffering so we cannot forgive. Managers earn fat salaries by smoothing things over, manipulating people into working together even when they hate each other. Mothers and managers are the great over-smoothers of the world. They prevent forgiving because they stifle hurt. Forgiving happens only when we first admit our hurt and scream our hate.

In the creative violence of love, you reach into the unchangeable past and cut away the wrong from the person who wronged you, you erase the hurt in the archives of your heart. When you pull it off, you do the one thing, the only thing, that can remedy the inevitability of painful history. The grace to do it is from God. The decision to do it is our own.

Why forgive?

To the guilty, forgiveness comes as amazing grace. To the offended, forgiving may sound like outrageous injustice. A straight-line moral sense tells most people that the guilty ought to pay their dues: Forgiving is for suckers. Forgiveness is a gyp.

Take Simon Wiesenthal's story, for instance: Wiesenthal was a prisoner in the Mauthausen concentration camp in Poland. One day he was assigned to clean out rubbish from a barn the Germans had improvised into a hospital for wounded soldiers. Toward evening a nurse took Wiesenthal by the hand and led him to a young SS trooper, his face bandaged with puss-soaked rags, eyes tucked behind the gauze. He was perhaps 21 years old. He grabbed Wiesenthal's hand and clutched it. He said that he had to talk to a Jew; he could not die before he had confessed the sins he had committed against helpless Jews, and he had to be forgiven by a Jew before he died. So he told Wiesenthal a horrible tale of how his battalion had gunned down Jews, parents and children, who were trying to escape from a house set afire by the SS troopers.

Wiesenthal listened to the dying man's whole story, first the story of his innocent youth, and then the story of his participation in evil. At the end, Wiesenthal jerked his hand away and walked out of the barn: No word was spoken, no forgiveness was given. Wiesenthal would not, could not, forgive. But he was not sure he did right.

He ended his story, *The Sunflower* (Shocken, 1976), with a question: "What would you have done?" Thirty-two eminent persons, mostly Jewish, contributed their answers to his hard question. Most said Wiesenthal was right: he should not have forgiven the SS trooper; it would not have been fair. Why should a man who gave his will to the doing of monumental evil expect a quick word of forgiveness on his death-bed? What right had Wiesenthal to forgive the man for evil he had done to other Jews? If Wiesenthal forgave the soldier, he would be saying that the Holocaust was not so evil. "Let the SS trooper go to hell," said one respondent.

Many of us feel the same way when we are unfairly hurt in far less horrible ways. Sometimes our hate is the only ace we have left in our deck. Our contempt is our only weapon. Our plan to get even is our only consolation. Why should we forgive?

Why indeed? I do not think we should urge people to forgive unless we consider the superhuman task we ask of them. To get a hint of the gospel's revolution of forgiveness we need to get inside the moral skin of a righteous Pharisee with a

clear eye for how wrongs really ought to be settled—according to natural, straight-lined fairness.

What is the answer to the unfairness of forgiving? It can only be that forgiving is, after all, a better way to fairness.

First, forgiving creates a new possibility of fairness by releasing us from the unfair past. A moment of unfair wrong has been done; it is in the inevitable past. If we choose, we can stick with that past. And we can multiply its wrongness. If we do not forgive, our only recourse is revenge. But revenge glues us to the past. And it dooms us to repeat it.

Revenge never evens the score, for alienated people never keep score of wrongs by the same mathematics. Enemies never agree on the score because each feels the wounds he receives differently from the wounds he gives. How many of her put-downs equal his slaps in the face? We cannot get even; this is the inner fatality of all revenge.

Forgiving takes us off the escalator of revenge so that both of us can stop the chain of incremented wrongs. We start over. We start over as if the wrongdoer had not hurt us at all. But we start over to begin a new and fairer relationship. We will probably fail again. And we will need to forgive again. The doorway to justice closes time and time again. And forgiveness remains the only way to open the door.

Second, forgiveness brings fairness to the forgiver. It is the hurting person who most feels the burden of unfairness; but he only condemns himself to more unfairness if he refuses to forgive.

Is it fair to be stuck to a painful past? Is it fair to be walloped again and again by the old unfair hurt? Vengeance is having a videotape planted in your soul that cannot be turned off. It plays the painful scene over and over again inside your mind. It hooks you into its instant replays. And each time it replays, you feel the clap of pain again. Is this fair?

Forgiving turns off the videotape of pained memory. Forgiving sets you free. Forgiving is the only way to stop the cycle of unfair pain turning in your memory.

Why forgive? Forgiving is the only way back to fairness. "Let the SS trooper go to hell," is the word of someone condemned to suffer again, and again the unfair pain of the past. To what end?

How do we forgive?

I must say something about how we forgive—but I cannot; I do not know how. Charles Williams said that pardon, like love, is ours only for fun; essentially we cannot do it. Maybe we cannot. But we do it anyway—sometimes! Like fumbling amateurs, to be sure, but we do it. Here are three things I have noticed about how people forgive:

They forgive slowly. There are instant forgivers, I suppose, but not many. We should not count on power to forgive bad hurts very quickly.

C. S. Lewis had a monster for a teacher when he was a boy. He hated that academic sadist most of his life. But a few months before the end, he wrote to his American friend: "Dear Mary ... Do you know, only a few weeks ago, I realized suddenly that I had at last forgiven the cruel schoolmaster who so darkened my childhood. I had been trying to do it for years." Essentially, we cannot; but eventually we do. God takes his time with a lot of things. Why should we not take ours with a hard miracle like forgiving?

They forgive communally. Can anyone forgive alone? I do not think I can. I need people who hurt as I hurt, and who hate as I hate. I need persons who are struggling as hard as I need to struggle before I come through forgivingly. I know only socialized forgiving. It is fine if you can do it all by yourself; but if you are hooked into your videotape of past pain, seek a fellowship of slow forgivers. They may help.

They forgive as they are forgiven. When it comes down to it, anyone who forgives can hardly tell the difference between feeling forgiven and doing the forgiving. We are such a mixture of sinners and sinned against, we cannot forgive people who offend us without feeling that we are being set free ourselves.

I haven't found a better example of this truth than Corrie Ten Boom. She was stuck for the war years in a concentration camp, humiliated and degraded, especially in the delousing shower where the women were ogled by the leering guards. But she made it through that hell. And eventually she felt she had, by grace, forgiven even those fiends who guarded the shower stalls.

So she preached forgiveness, for individuals, for all of Europe. She preached it in Bloemendaal, in the United States, and, one Sunday, in Munich. After the sermon, greeting people, she saw a man come toward her, hand outstretched: "Ja, Fräulein, it is wonderful that Jesus forgives us all our sins, just as you say." She remembered his face; it was the leering, lecherous, mocking face of an SS guard of the shower stall.

Her hand froze at her side. She could not forgive. She thought she had forgiven all. But she could not forgive when she met a guard, standing in the solid flesh in front of her. Ashamed, horrified at herself, she prayed: "Lord, forgive me, I cannot forgive." And as she prayed she felt forgiven, accepted, in spite of her shabby performance as a famous forgiver.

Her hand was suddenly unfrozen. The ice of hate melted. Her hand went out. She forgave as she felt forgiven. And I suspect she would not be able to sort out the difference.

Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty, free at last! Freed by the only remedy for the inevitability of our history.

To forgive is to put down your 50-pound pack after a 10-mile climb up a mountain.

To forgive is to fall into a chair after a 15-mile marathon.

To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you.

To forgive is to reach back into your hurting past and recreate it in your memory so that you can begin again.

To forgive is to dance to the beat of God's forgiving heart. It is to ride the crest of love's strongest wave.

Our only escape from history's cruel unfairness, our only passage to the future's creative possibilities, is the miracle of forgiving.

—Lewis B. Smedes is professor emeritus of theology and ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary and author of The Art of Forgiving: When You Need to Forgive and Don't Know How (Ballantine).

"Forgiveness—The Power to Change the Past," by Lewis B. Smedes,
CHRISTIANITY TODAY, 1983

Article Two

Where Do We Get Self Worth?¹

Pretty Woman

I thought "beautiful" was out of reach for an average woman like me, or was it?

By Shea M. Gregory, for the study, "Where Do We Get Self -Worth?"

When I was a little girl, I used to wonder if, before we were born, we stood in line in heaven and requested our lives.

"Ah," I imagined a large angel with an imposing wing span speaking to me, "you're going to be a girl. Very well, what would you like? Long legs? A great figure? Fame? Fortune?"

Innocently I answered him, "If you please, sir, I'd like ... a nice personality." And with no time to reconsider—Zap!—I was born and here I am. Less than five feet tall, not-so-straight teeth, blotchy skin, and enough of a figure for two women.

Once, I asked my brother if he thought I was pretty. He glanced up at me from his sheet music and told me to go away. "Darnell, I'm serious," I whined. "Am I pretty?" Realizing the only way to get me to leave was to answer me, he took a deep breath and looked me over from head to toe.

"Your face is all right," he said finally. "You have a quirky personality. You're okay."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked, my voice rising. "So, what you're saying is, I'm too fat and I act like a fool!"

"That's not what I said," he answered calmly, returning to his work.

"That's not what you said? That's exactly what you said!" I spit out at him. "You said no guy will ever want me because I'm ugly and I'm stupid! What do I have to do to get a little affirmation around here?!" I yelled, storming from the room.

So this was my life. Throughout it I struggled with feelings of ugliness and inadequacy. My friends had good looks, skinny ankles, and straight teeth. They got asked out on dates. I got dates on a fruit tray at Christmas. They became

¹ This study is adapted from Christianity Today, "Where Do We Get Self Worth" *Today's Christian Woman Series* (2005)

homecoming queens and cheerleaders while I wallowed in a state of below averageness, longing to be an airbrushed model, waiting to wake up beautiful.

Then one day I met Jesus. A girlfriend had invited me to church. As I sang along with the rest of the voices lifted in worship, I was overcome by a sense of guilt and unworthiness. This wonderful God we were singing about, how could he love fat and ugly me? But during the service I began to realize that God does love me—just as I am. That day I accepted God's love and sacrifice for me. Over time I've gained the assurance that he loves me more than I can imagine and that I'm truly beautiful in the way that matters most—on the inside.

But my old negative feelings about myself didn't immediately disappear. Some days, they came in droves, and I struggled to battle them off. Like the time I met with my friends Diane and Leona for lunch.

I was thirtysomething, reaching my sexual prime, unmarried, and retaining water. It wasn't a good day. We met at a local restaurant and the topic of conversation quickly turned to men.

"So, how's Eugene?" Diane asked.

Leona waved her hand. "Oh, please, no," she answered.

"You're not seeing him anymore?" I asked.

"Girl, that was two weeks ago," she replied, "and we weren't really seeing each other. We were just, you know, talkin'."

"Oh," Diane and I replied in unison.

"No!" Leona stressed emphatically and started naming other guys she'd met recently.

"What I want to know is how and where you meet these men?" Diane queried.

Leona sighed heavily as if disgusted by it all. Personally, I was on the edge of my seat, ready to take mental notes. At the first opportune moment, I'd run to the bathroom and write it all down on a square of toilet paper. She took a slow, laborious bite of her sandwich and chewed thoughtfully.

Please answer the question, I thought to myself. I was holding my breath. My future hung in the balance between Leona's answer and pastrami on rye.

She took too long. I reached over and moved her plate to the other end of the table. "Spill the beans, now!" I hissed.

Leona pouted as if I'd hurt her feelings, then rolled her eyes. She'd seen this look before. It was ugly. My glare spoke envy. It exposed my desperation and longing, all the feelings a mature Christian woman should have been able to rise above. But this Plainer-Than-Jane was sick and tired of being quirky. I wanted a man.

"Where are the men? How do I get one?" I whispered.

Leona pursed her lips. But I held my ground. No info, no sandwich.

I won.

"You know how it is," she said. "You walk out the door and men ask you out on a date."

What?!

"Oh," I replied softly. Obviously I lived in the wrong neighborhood. I looked to Diane. After a few moments she remembered she had food in her mouth and closed it.

"You girls know what it's like," Leona continued. "You can't even walk to the car these days without having men stop to talk to you."

"No, Leona," I said flatly. "I don't know what it's like."

"Oh, girl, yes you do," she insisted.

I watched Leona. She was drop-dead beautiful from head to toe. Her movements were soft and flowing, her voice soft, sultry. Every hair was in place and her fashionable clothes fit perfectly. I tried to remember the last time I'd visited a beauty salon and thought of the four-year-old bra I was wearing, held together with a carefully placed safety pin. I felt very inadequate.

"Do men ask *you* out every time you walk out your door?" I asked Diane later that afternoon when she dropped me off at home.

"No," she said.

"Me neither. Do you think I should move to a different street?"

My friend looked at me searchingly. Looking at me like that, she reminded me a lot of my brother.

Waving good-bye, I got an idea. It came to me suddenly, like a craving for chocolate. I ran to the house and into the bedroom, stripped, and stood naked in front of the mirror. After the initial shock wore off, I peered at myself from every imaginable angle, trying to catch my best side. *If I can accentuate my best angle, I'll be asked out all the time, too*, I thought to myself. Finally, however, I gave up and did humanity a favor by putting my clothes back on.

Self-esteem depleted, I hung my head and was ready to fling myself onto the bed in despair when I saw my Bible next to my pillow. I opened it to Psalm 139. "I am fearfully and wonderfully made" is what the psalmist said in verse 14.

"I know God, but ...," I began to protest; then the words of 1 Samuel, chapter 16 came to mind. "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (v. 7).

I was thoughtful for a few moments. Then, hesitantly, I got up and peeked back in the mirror. All of me was still there, every lovin' inch. "Well, God," I said, still looking at my not-so-perfect, ample reflection, "Your Word says I'm special, so it must be so." The face smiling back at me winked knowingly. I said a

short prayer of thanksgiving and did the best thing I could have possibly done for myself at that moment. I went shopping.

Leona's married now. She says she was just walking down the street. "You know how it is downtown, girl. You walk past a store and all the guys come out. They ask you out; they ask you to marry them. So one day ..."

I've walked down that street a hundred times and no shop owner or clerk ever asked me anything, not even what time it was. It was hard, but I forced myself to face reality. They must've all been busy with customers when I went past. Obviously, they hadn't read 1 Samuel lately.

I asked my brother recently, "Darnell, am I pretty?"

He smiled. "You're a precious pearl," he said, "a beautiful, godly woman."

Guess we've both improved over the years.

—Shea M. Gregory is a freelance writer living in California.

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